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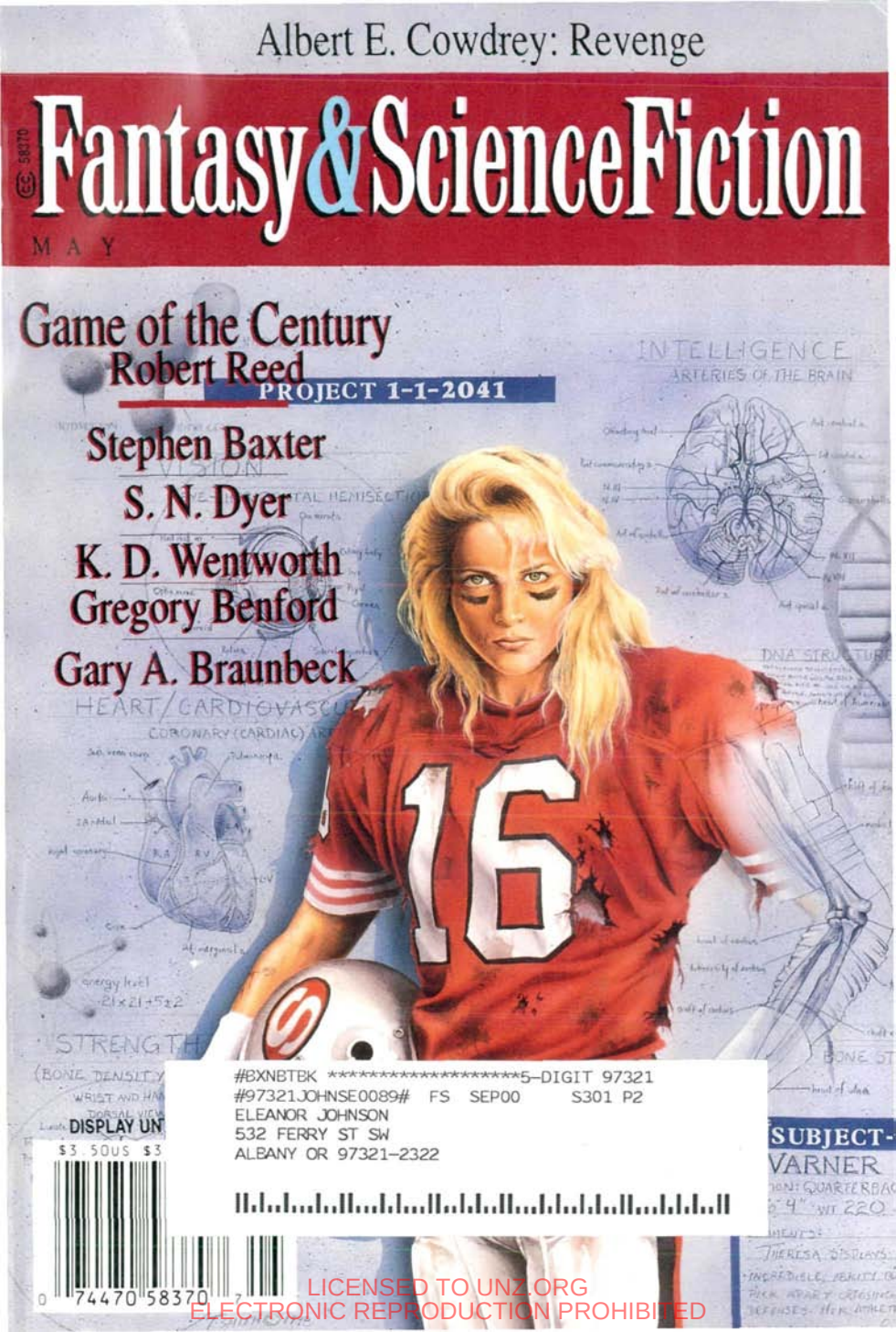

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Robert Reed is one of our most prolific and imaginative contributors. His last story for us was "Will Be," which appeared in our January issue. His new story takes us into the middle of the next century, where the sport of football remains relatively unchanged... but the people playing it are very different (thanks to a teeny-tiny little loophole in the law).

A citizen of Lincoln, Nebraska, Mr. Reed has recently published his first collection of stories, The Dragons of Springplace, *and he is at work on his ninth novel.*

Game of the Century

By Robert Reed

THE WINDOW WAS LEFT OPEN at midnight, January 1, 2041, and three minutes, twenty-one seconds later it was closed again by the decisive, barely legible signature of an elderly Supreme Court justice who reportedly quipped, "I don't know why I have to. Folks who like screwing sheep are just going to keep at it."

Probably so.

But the issues were larger than traditional bestiality. Loopholes in some badly drafted legislation had made it perfectly legal to manipulate the human genome in radical ways. What's more, said offspring were deemed human in all rights and privileges inside the US of NA. For two hundred and twelve seconds, couples and single women could legally conceive by any route available to modern science. And while few clinics and fewer top-grade hospitals had interest in the work, there were key exceptions. Some fourteen hundred human eggs were fertilized with tailored sperm, then instantly implanted inside willing mothers. News services that had paid minimal attention to the legislative breakdown

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took a sudden glaring interest in the nameless, still invisible offspring. The blastulas were dubbed the 1-1-2041s, and everything about their lives became the subject of intense public scrutiny and fascination and self-righteous horror.

Despite computer models and experiments on chimpanzees, there were surprises. Nearly a third of the fetuses were stillborn, or worse. Twenty-nine mothers were killed as a result of their pregnancies. Immunological problems, mostly. But in one case, a healthy woman in her mid-twenties died when her boy, perhaps bothered by the drumming of her heart, reached through her uterine wall and intestines, grabbing and squeezing the offending organ with both of his powerful hands.

Of the nine hundred-plus fetuses who survived, almost thirty percent were mentally impaired or physically frail. Remarkably, others seemed entirely normal, their human genes running roughshod over their more exotic parts. But several hundred of the 1-1-2041s were blessed with perfect health as well as a remarkable stew of talents. Even as newborns, they astonished the researchers who tested their reflexes and their highly tuned senses. The proudest parents released the data to the media, then mixed themselves celebratory cocktails, stepping out onto their porches and balconies to wait for the lucrative offers to start flowing their way.

MARLBORO JONES came with a colorful reputation. His father was a crack dealer shot dead in a dispute over footwear. With his teenage mother, Marlboro had lived at dozens of addresses before her mind failed and she leaped out of their bedroom window to stop the voices, and from there his life was a string of unbroken successes. He had coached, and won, at three different schools. He was currently the youngest head coach of a Top Alliance team. Thirty-six years old, he looked twenty-six, his chiseled features built around the bright, amoral eyes of a squirrel. Marlboro was the kind of handsome that made his charm appealing, and he was charming in a way that made his looks and mannerisms delightfully boyish. A laser mind lurked behind those eyes, yet in most circumstances he preferred playing the cultured hick, knowing how much it improved his odds.

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"He's a fine lookin' boy," the coach drawled. "Fine lookin'."

The proud parents stood arm in arm, smiling with a frothy, nervous joy.

"May I?" asked Marlboro. Then without waiting for permission, he yanked the screen off the crib, reached in and grabbed both bare feet. He tugged once, then again. Harder. "Damn, look at those legs! You'd think this boy'd be scampering around already. Strong as these seem...!"

"Well," said his mother, "he is awfully active."

"In a good way," the father cautioned.

"I believe it. I do!" Marlboro grinned, noticing that Mom looked awfully sweet in a tired-of-motherhood way, and it was too bad that he couldn't make a play for her, too. "Let me tell ya what I'm offering," he boomed. "A free ride. For the boy here — "

"Alan," Mom interjected.

"Alan," the coach repeated. Instantly, with an easy affection. Then he gave her a little wink, saying, "For Alan. A free education and every benefit that I'm allowed to give. Plus the same for your other two kids. Which I'm not supposed to offer. But it's my school and my scholarships, and I'll be damned if it's anybody's business but yours and mine!"

The parents squeezed one another, then with a nervous voice, the father made himself ask, "What about us?"

The coach didn't blink.

"What do you want, Mr. Wilde?" Marlboro smiled and said, "Name it."

"I'm not sure," the father confessed. "I know that we can't be too obvious — "

"But we were hoping," Mom blurted. "I mean, it's not like we're wealthy people. And we had to spend most of our savings — "

"On your little Alan. I bet you did." A huge wink was followed with, "It'll be taken care of. My school doesn't have that big college of genetics for nothing." He looked at the infant again, investing several seconds of hard thought into how they could bend the system just enough. Then he promised, "You'll be reimbursed for your expenses. Up front. And we'll put your son on the payroll. Gentlefolks in lab coats'll come take blood every half-year or so. For a healthy, just-under-the-table fee. How's that sound?"

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The father seemed doubtful. "Will the scientists agree to that?"

"If I want it done," the coach promised.

"Will they actually use his blood?" The father seemed uneasy. Even a little disgusted. "I don't like thinking of Alan being some kind of laboratory project."

Marlboro stared at him for a long moment.

Never blinking.

Then he said, "Sir." He said, "If you want, they can pass those samples to you, and you can flush them down your own toilet. Is that good enough?"

Nobody spoke.

Then he took a different course, using his most mature voice to tell them, "Alan is a fine, fine boy. But you've got to realize something. He's going to have more than his share of problems. Special kids always do." Then with a warm smile, Marlboro promised, "I'll protect him for you. With all my resources and my good country sense, I'll see that none of those predators out there get their claws in your little Alan."

Mom said, "That's good to hear. That's fine."

But Father shrugged, asking, "What about you? It'll be years before Alan can actually play, and you could have left for the pros by then."

"Never," Marlboro blurted.

Then he gave the woman his best wink and grin, saying, "You know what kind of talent I've been signing up. Do you really think I'd go anywhere else? Ever?"

She turned to her husband, saying, "We'll sign."

"But — ?"

"No. We're going to commit."

Marlboro reconfigured the appropriate contracts, getting everyone's signature. Then he squeezed one of his recruit's meaty feet, saying, "See ya later, Alan."

Wearing an unreadable smile, he stepped out the front door. A hundred or so sports reporters were gathered on the small lawn, and through their cameras, as many as twenty million fans were watching the scene.

They watched Coach Jones smile and say nothing. Then he raised his arms suddenly, high overhead, and screamed those instantly famous words:

"The Wildman's coming to Tech!"

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* * *

There was something about the girl. Perfect strangers thought nothing of coming up to her and asking where she was going to college.

"State," she would reply. Flat out.

"In what sport?" some inquired. While others, knowing that she played the game on occasion, would guess, "Are you joining the volleyball team?"

"No," Theresa would tell the latter group. Never patient, but usually polite. "I hate volleyball," she would explain, not wanting to be confused for one of those glandular, ritualistic girls. And she always told everyone, friends and strangers alike, "I'm going to play quarterback for the football team. For Coach Rickover."

Knowledgeable people were surprised, and puzzled. Some would clear their throats and look up into Theresa's golden eyes, commenting in an offhand way, "But Rickover doesn't let women play."

That was a problem, sure.

Daddy was a proud alumnus of State and a letterman on the famous '33 squad. When Theresa was born, there was no question about where she was going. In '41, Rickover was only an assistant coach. Penises weren't required equipment. The venerable Coach Mannstein had shuffled into her nursery and made his best offer, then shuffled back out to meet with press and boosters, promising the world that he would still be coaching when that delightfully young lady was calling plays for the best team to ever take any field of play.

But six years later, while enjoying the company of a mostly willing cheerleader, Coach Mannstein felt a searing pain in his head, lost all feeling in his ample body, and died.

Rickover inherited the program.

A religious man driven by a quixotic understanding of the Bible, one of his first official acts was to send a letter to Theresa's parents, explaining at length why he couldn't allow their daughter to join his team. "Football," he wrote, "is nothing but ritualized warfare, and women don't belong in the trenches. I am sorry. On the other hand, Coach Terry is a personal friend, and I would be more than happy to have him introduce you to our nationally ranked women's volleyball program.

"Thank you sincerely."

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"Coach."

The refusal was a crushing blow for Daddy.

For Theresa, it was a ghostly abstraction that she couldn't connect with those things that she truly knew and understood.

Not that she was a stupid child. Unlike many of her 1-1-2041 peers, her grades were respectably average, and in spatial subjects, like geometry and geography, she excelled. Also unlike her peers, Theresa didn't have problems with rage or with residual instincts. Dogs and cats didn't mysteriously vanish in her neighborhood. She was a good person with friends and her genuine admirers. Parents trusted her with their babies. Children she didn't know liked to beg for rides on her back. Once she was old enough to date, the boys practically lined up. Out of sexual curiosity, in part. But also out of fondness and an odd respect. Some of her boyfriends confided that they preferred her to regular girls. Something about her — and not just a physical something — set them at ease. Made them feel safe. A strange thing for adolescent males to admit, while for Theresa, it was just another circumstance in a life filled with nothing but circumstances.

In football, she always played quarterback. Whether on playground teams, or in the various midget leagues, or on the varsity squad in high school.

Her high school teams won the state championship three years in a row. And they would have won when she was a senior, except a mutant strain of parvovirus gave her a fever and chills, and eventually, hallucinations. Theresa started throwing hundred meter bullets toward her more compelling hallucinations, wounding several fans, and her coach grudgingly ordered her off the field and into a hospital bed.

Once State relinquished all claims on the girl, a steady stream of coaches and boosters and sports agents began the inevitable parade.

Marlboro Jones was the most persistent soul. He had already stockpiled a full dozen of the 1-1-2041s, including the premier player of all time: Alan, The Wildman, Wilde. But the coach assured Theresa that he still needed a quality quarterback. With a big wink and a bigger grin, he said, "You're going to be my field general, young lady. I know you know it, the same as I do...!"

Theresa didn't mention what she really knew.

She let Daddy talk. For years, that proud man had entertained

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fantasies of Rickover moving to the pros, leaving the door open for his only child. But it hadn't happened, and it wouldn't. And over the last few years, with Jones's help, he had convinced himself that Theresa should play instead for State's great rival. Call it justice. Or better, revenge. Either way, what mattered was that she would go somewhere that her talents could blossom. That's all that mattered, Daddy told the coach. And Marlboro replied with a knowing nod and a sparkling of the eyes, finally turning to his prospect, and with a victor's smile, asking, "What's best for you? Tour our campus first? Or get this signing crap out of the way?"

Theresa said, "Neither."

Then she remembered to add, "Sir," with a forced politeness.

Both men were stunned. But the coach was too slick to let it show. Staring at the tall, big-shouldered lady, he conjured up his finest drawl, telling her, "I can fix it. Whatever's broke, it can be fixed."

"Darling," her father mumbled. "What's wrong?"

She looked at her father's puffy, confused face. "This man doesn't want me for quarterback, Daddy. He just doesn't want me playing somewhere else."

After seventeen years of living with the girl, her father knew better than to doubt her instincts. Glaring at Marlboro, he asked flat out, "Is that true?"

"No," the man lied.

Instantly, convincingly.

Then he sputtered, adding, "That Mosgrove kid has too much chimp in his arm. And not enough touch."

There was a prolonged, uncomfortable silence.

Then Theresa informed both of them, "I've made up my mind, anyway. Starting next year, I'm going to play for State."

Daddy was startled and a bit frustrated. But as always, a little bit proud, too.

Coach Jones was, if anything, amused. The squirrel eyes smiled, and the handsome mouth tried not to follow suit. And after a few more seconds of painful silence, he said, "I've known Rickover for most of my adult life. And you know what, little girl? You've definitely got your work cut out for you."

* * *

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Jones was mistaken.

Theresa believed.

A lifetime spent around coaches had taught her that the species was passionate and stubborn and usually wrong about everything that wasn't lashed to the game in front of them. But what made coaches ridiculous in the larger world helped them survive in theirs. Because they were stubborn and overblown, they could motivate the boys and girls around them; and the very best coaches had a gift for seducing their players, causing them to lash their souls to the game, and the next game, and every game to follow.

All Theresa needed to do, she believed, was out-stubborn Coach Rickover.

State had a walk-on program. Overachievers from the Yukon to the Yucatan swarmed into campus in late summer, prepared to fight it out for a handful of scholarships. Theresa enrolled with the rest of them, then with her father in tow, showed up for the first morning's practice. An assistant coach approached. Polite and determined, he thanked her for coming, but she wasn't welcome. But they returned for the afternoon practice, this time accompanied by an AI advocate — part lawyer, part mediator — who spoke to a succession of assistant coaches with the quietly smoldering language of lawsuits and public relations nightmares.

Theresa's legal standing was questionable, at best. Courts had stopped showing interest in young ladies wanting to play an increasingly violent sport. But the threat to call the media seemed to work. Suddenly, without warning, the quarterback coach walked up to her and looked up, saying to her face, "All right. Let's see what you can do."

She was the best on the field, easily.

Pinpoint passes to eighty meters. A sprint speed that mauled every pure-human record. And best of all, the seemingly innate ability to glance at a fluid defense and pick it apart. Maybe Theresa lacked the elusive moves of some 1-1-2041s, which was the closest thing to a weakness. But she made up for it with those big shoulders that she wielded like dozer blades, leaving half a dozen strong young men lying flat on their backs, trying to recall why they ever took up this damned sport.

By the next morning, she was taking hikes with the varsity squad.

Coach Rickover went as far as strolling up to her and saying, "Welcome,

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miss," with that cool, almost friendly voice. Then he looked away, adding, "And the best of luck to you."

It was a trap.

During a no-contact drill, one of the second-string pure-human linebackers came through the line and leveled her when she wasn't ready. Then he squatted low and shouted into her face, "Bitch! Dog bitch! Pussy bitch! Bitch!"

Theresa nearly struck him.

In her mind, she left his smug face strewn across the wiry green grass. But then Rickover would have his excuse — she was a discipline problem — and her career would have encompassed barely one day.

She didn't hit the bastard, or even chew off one of his fingers.

Instead she went back to throwing lasers at her receivers and running between the tackles. Sometimes her blockers would go on vacation, allowing two or three rushers to drag her to the ground. Yet Theresa always got up again and limped back to the huddle, staring at the stubborn human eyes until those eyes, and the minds behind them, blinked.

It went on that way for a week.

Because she wouldn't allow herself even the possibility of escape, Theresa prepared herself for another four months of inglorious abuse. And if need be, another three years after that.

Her mother came to visit and to beg her daughter to give it up.

"For your sake, and mine. Just do the brave thing and walk away."

Theresa loved her mother, but she had no illusions: The woman was utterly, hopelessly weak.

Daddy was the one who scared her. He was standing over his daughter, watching as she carefully licked at a gash that came when she was thrown against a metal bench, her leg opened up from the knee to her badly swollen ankle. And with a weakling's little voice, he told her, "This isn't my dream anymore. You need to reconsider. That, or you'll have to bury me. My nerves can't take any more twisting."

Picking thick golden strands of fur from her long, long tongue, Theresa stared at him. And hiding her sadness, she told him, "You're right, Daddy. This isn't your dream."

The war between player and coach escalated that next morning.

Nine other 1-1-2041s were on the team. Theresa was promoted to first

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team just so they could have a shot at her. She threw passes, and she was knocked flat. She ran sideways, and minotaurs in white jerseys flung her backward, burying their knees into her kidneys and uterus. Then she moved to defense, playing ABMback for a few downs, and their woolly, low-built running back drove her against the juice cooler, knocking her helmet loose and chewing on one of her ears, then saying into that blood, "There's more coming, darling. There's always more coming."

Yet despite the carnage, the 1-1-2041s weren't delivering real blows.

Not compared to what they could have done.

It dawned on Theresa that Rickover and his staff, for all their intimate knowledge about muscle and bone, had no idea what their players were capable of. She watched those grown men nodding, impressed with the bomb-like impacts and spattered blood. Sprawled out on her back, waiting for her lungs to work again, she found herself studying Rickover: He was at least as handsome as Marlboro Jones, but much less attractive. There was something both analytical and dead about the man. And underneath it all, he was shy. Deeply and eternally shy. Wasn't that a trait that came straight out of your genetics? A trait and an affliction that she lacked, thankfully.

Theresa stood again, and she limped through the milling players and interns, then the assistant coaches, stepping into Rickover's line of sight, forcing him to look at her.

"I still want to play for you," she told him. "But you know, Coach...I don't think I'll ever like you...." And with that, she turned and hobbled back to the field.

Next morning, a decision had come down from On High.

Theresa was named the new first-string quarterback, and the former first-string — a tall, bayonet-shaped boy nicknamed Man O War — was made rocketback.

For the last bits of summer and until the night before their first game, Theresa believed that her little speech had done its magic. She was so confident of her impression that she repeated her speech to her favorite rocketback. And Man O War gave a little laugh, then climbed out of her narrow dormitory bed, stretching out on the hard floor, pulling one leg behind his head, then the other.

"That's not what happened," he said mildly. Smiling now.

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She said, "What didn't?"

"It was the nine of us. The other 1-1-2041s." He kept smiling, bending forward until his chin was resting against his naked crotch, and he licked himself with a practiced deftness. Once finished, he sat up and explained, "We went to Coach's house that night. And we told him that if we were supposed to keep hurting you, we might as well kill you. And eat you. Right in the middle of practice."

She stared at her lover for a long moment, unsure what to believe.

Theresa could read human faces. And she could smell their moods boiling out of their hairless flesh. But no matter how hard she tried, she could never decipher that furry chimera of a face.

"Would you really have?" she finally asked.

"Killed you? Not me," Man O War said instantly.

Then he was laughing, reminding her, "But those linebackers...you never can tell what's inside their smooth little minds...!"

TECH AND STATE began the season on top of every sport reporter's rankings and the power polls and leading almost every astrologer's sure-picks. Since they had two more 1-1-2041s on their roster, including the Wildman, Tech was given the edge. Professional observers and fans, as well as AI analysts, couldn't imagine any team challenging either of them. On the season's second weekend, State met a strong Texas squad with its own handful of 1-1-2041s. They beat them by seventy points. The future seemed assured. Barring catastrophe, the two teams of the century would win every contest, then go to war on New Year's Day, inside the venerable Hope Dome, and the issue about who was best and who was merely second best would be settled for the ages.

In public, both coaching staffs and the coached players spouted all the hoary clichés. Take it one play at a time, and one game at a time, and never eat your chicken before it's cooked through.

But in private, and particularly during closed practices, there was one opponent and only one, and every mindless drill and every snake run on the stadium stairs and particularly every two ton rep in the weight room was meant for Tech. For State. For glory and the championship and a trophy built from gold and sculpted light.

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In the third week of the season, Coach Jones began using his 1-1-2041s on both sides of the line.

Coach Rickover told reporters that he didn't approve of those tactics. "Even superhumans need rest," he claimed. But that was before Tech devastated an excellent Alabama squad by more than a hundred and twenty points. Rickover prayed to God, talked to several physiologists, then made the same outrageous adjustment.

In their fourth game, Theresa played at quarterback and ABM.

Not only did she throw a school record ten touchdowns, she also ran for four more, plus she snagged five interceptions, galloping three of them back for scores.

"You're the Heisman front-runner," a female reporter assured her, winking and grinning as if they were girlfriends. "How does it feel?"

How do you answer such a silly question?

"It's an honor," Theresa offered. "Of course it is."

The reporter smiled slyly, then assaulted her with another silliness. "So what are your goals for the rest of the season?"

"To improve," Theresa muttered. "Every Saturday, from here on."

"Most of your talented teammates will turn professional at the end of the year." A pause. Then she said, "What about you, Theresa? Will you do the same?"

She hadn't considered it. The UFL was an abstraction, and a distraction, and she didn't have time or the energy to bother with either.

"All I think about," she admitted, "is this season."

A dubious frown.

Then the reporter asked, "What do you think of Tech's team?"

One play at a time, game at a time, and cook your chicken...

"Okay. But what about the Wildman?"

Nothing simple came into Theresa's head. She paused for a long moment, then told the truth. "I don't know Alan Wilde."

"But do you think it's right...? Having a confessed killer as your linebacker and star running back...?"

The reporter was talking about the Wildman. Vague recollections of a violent death and a famous, brief trial came to mind. But Theresa's parents had shielded her from any furor about the 1-1-2041s. Honestly, the best she could offer this woman was a shrug and her own smile,

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admitting, "It's not right to murder. Anyone. For any reason."

That simple declaration was the night's lead story on every sports network.

"Heisman hopeful calls her opponent a murderer! Even though the death was ruled justifiable homicide!"

Judging by the noise, it made for a compelling story.

Whatever the hell that means.

After the season's seventh week, a coalition of coaches and university presidents filed suit against the two front-runners. The games to date had resulted in nearly two hundred concussions, four hundred broken bones, and thirteen injuries so severe that young, pure-human boys were still lying in hospital beds, existing in protective comas.

"We won't play you anymore," the coalition declared.

They publicly accused both schools of recruiting abuses, and in private, they warned that if the remaining games weren't canceled, they would lead the pack in a quick and bloody inquisition.

Coach Rickover responded at his weekly press conference. With a Bible in hand, he gave a long rambling speech about his innocence and how the playing fields were perfectly level.

Marlboro Jones took a different tack.

Accompanied by his school's lawyers, AI and human, he visited the ringleaders. "You goddamn pussies!" he shouted. "We've got contracts with you. We've got television deals with the networks. If you think we're letting your dicks wriggle free of this hook, you're not only cowards. You're stupid, too!"

Then he sat back, letting the lawyers dress up his opinion in their own impenetrable language.

But the opponents weren't fools. A new-generation AI began to list every known infraction: Payments to players and their families. Secretive changes of title for homes and businesses. Three boosters forming a charity whose only known function was to funnel funds to the topflight players. And worst by far, a series of hushed-up felonies connected to the 1-1-2041s under his care.

Marlboro didn't flinch.

Instead, he smiled — a bright, blistering smile that left every human

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in the room secretly trembling — and after a prolonged pause, he said, "Fine. Make it all public."

The AI said, "Thank you. We will."

"But," said Marlboro, "here's what I'll take public. You pussies."

With precision and a perfect ear for detail, the coach listed every secret infraction and every camouflaged scandal that had ever swirled around his opponents' programs. Twenty-plus years in this industry, and he knew everything. Or at least that was the impression he gave. And then as he finished, he said, "Pussies," again. And laughed. And he glared at the Stanford president — the ringleader of this rabble — telling that piece of high-born shit, "I guess we're stuck. We're just going to have to kill each other."

Nobody spoke.

Moved, or even breathed.

Then the president managed to find enough air to whisper, "What do you propose?"

"Tech and State win our games by forfeit," the coach told them. "And you agree not to play us in court, either."

The president said, "Maybe."

Then with a soft synthetic voice, his AI lawyer said, "Begging to differ, but I think we should pursue — "

Marlboro threw the talking box across the room.

It struck a wall, struck the floor. Then with an eerie calm, it said, "You cannot damage me, sir."

"Point taken." The coach turned to the humans. "Do we have a deal? Or don't we?"

Details were worked out; absolutely nothing was signed.

Near the end of negotiations, Marlboro announced, "Oh, and there's one last condition. I want to buy your lawyer." He pointed at the AI. "Bleed it of its secrets first. But I want it."

"Or what?" Stanford inquired.

"I start talking about your wives. Who likes it this way, who likes it that way. Just so everyone knows that what I'm saying is the truth."

The AI was sold. For a single dollar.

Complaining on and on with its thoughtful, useless voice, the box was thrown into the middle of Tech's next practice, and nothing was left

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afterward but gutted electronics pushed deep into the clipped green grass.

TECH'S AND STATE'S regular season was finished. But that turned out to be a blessing as far as school coffers and the entertainment conglomerates were concerned. Hundred point slaughters weren't winning the best ratings. In lieu of butchery, a series of ritualized scrimmages were held on Saturdays, each team dividing its top squads into two near-equal parts, then playing against themselves with enough skill and flair to bring packed stadiums and enormous remote audiences: All that helping to feed an accelerating, almost feverish interest in the coming showdown.

Sports addicts talked about little else.

While the larger public, caring nothing for the fabled gridiron, found plenty else to hang their interest on. The contrasting coaches, and the 1-1-2041s, and the debate about what is human, and particularly among girlfriends and wives, the salient fact that a female was the undisputed leader of one team.

Sports networks and digital wonderhouses began playing the game of the century early, boiling down its participants into algorithms and vectors and best guesses, then showing the best of their bloodless contests to surprisingly large audiences.

Eight times out of eleven, the digital Tech went away victors.

Not counting private and foreign betting, nearly ten billion reconstituted dollars had been wagered on the contest by Thanksgiving. By Christmas Eve, that figure had jumped another five-fold. Plus there were the traditional gubernatorial wagers of state-grown products: A ton of computer chips versus a ton of free-range buffalo.

Theresa spent Christmas at home with parents and grandparents, plus more than a dozen relatives who had managed to invite themselves. If anything, those cousins and uncles and assorted spouses were worse than a room full of reporters. They didn't know the rules. They expected disclosures. Confessions. The real and the dirty. And when Theresa offered any less-than-spectacular answer, it was met with disappointment and disbelief.

The faces said as much. And one little old aunt said it with her

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liquor-soddened mouth, telling her niece, "You're among family, darling. Why can't you trust us?"

Because she didn't know these people.

Over the past eighteen years, she had seen them sporadically, and all she remembered were their uncomfortable expressions and the careful words offered with quiet, overly cautious voices.

Looking at her, some had said, "She's a lovely girl."

"Exotic," others volunteered.

"You're very lucky," to her parents.

Then out of pure-human earshot, they would ask, "What do you think is inside her? Dog? Dinosaur? What?"

Theresa didn't know which genes went into her creation. What was more, she hadn't felt a compelling need to ask. But whatever chimerical stew made up her chromosomes, she had inherited wonderful ears that could pick up distant insults as well as the kindest, sweetest words.

She was trying to be patient and charitable when one idiot leaned forward, planted a drunken hand on her granite-hard thigh, then told her with a resoundingly patronizing tone, "I don't see what people complain about. Up close, you're a beautiful creature..."

Daddy heard those words, their tone.

And he detonated.

"What are you doing?" he screamed. "And get your hand off your niece!"

Uncle John flinched, the hand vanishing. Then he stared at his brother with a mixture of astonishment and building rage, taking a deep breath, then another, before finding the air to ask, "What did I say?"

"Why? Don't you remember?"

The poor fool sputtered something about being fair, for God's sake.

The rest of the family stood mute, and stunned, and a few began asking their personal clocks for the time.

"Leave," Daddy suggested.

To his brother, and everyone else, too.

He found the self-control to say, "Thank you for coming," but then added, "My daughter isn't a freak. She isn't, and remember that, and good night."

Christmas ended with a dash for the coats and some tenth-hearted, "Good lucks," lobbed in Theresa's direction.

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Then it was just the three of them. And Daddy offered Theresa a sorrowful expression, then repeated his reasoning. "I've been listening to their contemptuous crap for nearly twenty years. You're not a monster, or a possession, and I get sick, sick, sick of it."

Theresa said nothing.

Mother said, "Darling," to one of them. Theresa wasn't sure who.

When nobody responded, Mother rose and staggered into the kitchen, telling the AI to finish its cooking, then store the meat and vegetables and mounds of stuffing for later this week, and into next year.

Theresa kept staring at her father, trying to understand why she was so disappointed, and angry, and sad.

He averted his eyes, then said, "I know."

What did he know?

"You're right," he confessed. "You caught me. You know!"

But Theresa couldn't make herself ask, "What am I right about?"

A citizen of unalloyed strength, yet she couldn't summon enough air to ask, "What is it, Father? What am I supposed to know?"

The Hope Dome was older than the players. Led by Miami, a consortium of cities had built that gaudy glass and carbon-fiber structure out on the continental shelf. Its playing field lay nearly fifty meters beneath the water's surface, and rising ocean levels combined with the new generation of hurricanes had caused problems. One of the bowl officials even repeated that tired joke that it was hope holding back the Atlantic. But then he winked slyly and said, "Don't worry." He unlocked a heavy door next to State's locker, revealing an enormous room filled with roaring bilge pumps whose only purpose, he boasted, was to send a river's worth of tiny leaks back into the sea.

In contrast to the palace-like Dome, the playing field was utterly ordinary.

Its dimensions and black earth and fluorescent-fed grass made it identical to a thousand other indoor facilities.

The day after Christmas, and both teams were given the traditional tour of the Dome and its field. To help extract the last greasy drama out of the blandness, Tech was still finishing its walk-through when State arrived. On the field together, with cameras and the world watching, the

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teams got their first naked-eye look at one another. And with a hundred million people waiting for anything, the two Heisman candidates met, and without any fuss, the two politely shook hands.

The Wildman offered Theresa several flavors of surprise.

The first surprise was his appearance. She had seen endless images of man-child, and she'd been near plenty of 1-1-2041s. But the running back was still impressive. There was bison in him, she had heard. And gorilla. And what might have been Siberian tiger genes. Plus something with an enormous capacity to grow bone. Elephant, perhaps. Something in the shape of his enormous head reminded her of the ancient mammoth skulls that she'd seen haunting the university museum.

The second surprise was the Wildman's mannerisms. A bowl official, nervous enough to shiver, introduced the two of them, then practically threw himself backward. But the boy was polite, and in a passing way, charming.

"We meet," he grunted. "Finally."

Theresa stared at the swollen incisors and the giant dog eyes, and telling herself not to stumble over her tongue, she offered her hand and said, "Hello," with the same pleasant voice she used on every new friend.

The Wildman took her hand gently. Almost too softly to be felt.

And with a thin humor, he said, "What do you think they would do? If we got down on our knees and grazed?"

Then the third surprise said, "Alan."

And the fourth surprise added, "You're just joking. Aren't you, son?"

Parents weren't normally allowed to travel with the players. But the Wildes appeared to be the exception. Theresa later learned that they accompanied him everywhere, always. Pulling her hand out of Alan's giant hand, she offered them a smile, and the mother said, "How are you, dear?"

The father offered, "I'm an admirer." His right hand was plastic. Life-like, but not alive. Retrieving his hand, he added, "We're all admirers, of course."

How did he lose the limb? she wondered.

Because it was the polite thing to say, Theresa told them, "The best of luck to you. All of you."

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Together, the Wildes wished her the same cliché. Then they said, "Alan," in a shared voice. Practiced, and firmly patient.

The boy stared at Theresa for a long moment, his face unreadable. Perhaps there was nothing there to read. Then with a deep bass voice, he said, "Later."

"Later," she echoed.

Two hundred kilos of muscle and armored bone pivoted, walking away with his tiny, seemingly fragile parents flanking him — each adult holding tightly to one of the hands and whispering. Encouragements, or sage advice. Or grave warnings about the world.

Even with her spectacular ears, Theresa couldn't hear enough to tell.

Days meant light practices, then the daily press conferences where every ludicrous question was asked and asked again with a linebacker's single-mindedness. Then the evenings were stuffed full of tightly orchestrated fun: Cookouts. A parade. Seats at a nuclear polka concert. Then a beach party held in both teams' honor.

It was on the beach that the Tech quarterback, Mosgrove, made a half-joking comment. "You know what we should do? Together, I mean." And he told the other 1-1-2041s, thinking they would laugh about it.

But instead of laughing, a plan was drawn up between the sea trout dinner and the banana split dessert.

On New Year's Eve, coaches put their teams to bed at ten o'clock. That was the tradition. And an hour later, exactly twenty-two of their players crept out of their beds and their hotel rooms, slipping down to the same beach to gather in two distinct groups.

At midnight and for the next three minutes and twenty-one seconds, no one said one word. With fireworks and laser arrays going off on all sides, their eyes were pointed at the foot-chewed sand, and every face grew solemn. Reflective. Then Theresa said, "Now," and looked up, suddenly aware of the electricity passing between them.

What was she feeling? She couldn't put a name to it. Whatever it was, it was warm, and real, and it felt closer even than the warm salty air.

Still divided along team lines, the players quietly walked off the beach.

Theresa meant to return straight to bed, even though she wouldn't

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sleep. But she stopped first at the ladies' room, then happened past one of several hotel bars, a familiar face smiling out at her from the darkness, a thick hand waving her closer.

He was sitting alone in a booth, which surprised her.

With that slick, aw shucks voice, he asked, "Are my boys finding their way home again? Or am I going to have to get myself a posse?"

"They'll end up in their rooms," she assured.

"Sit," said the coach. Followed by, "Please."

She squeezed her legs under the booth. Marlboro cuddled with his beer, but he hadn't been alone for long. The cultured leather beneath Theresa was still warm. But not the seat next to her, she noted. And she found herself wondering who was here first.

"Buy you a drink, young lady?"

She didn't answer.

He laughed with that easy charm, touched the order pad and said, "Water, please. Just water."

"I really should leave," she told Marlboro.

But before she could make her legs move, he said, "You pegged me. That last time I came calling, you saw right through that brown shit I was flinging. About needing you for quarterback, and all that." A wink, then he added, "I was lying. Wasn't I?"

She didn't say one word.

Chilled water arrived, and Theresa found herself dipping into a strange paranoia. Mosgrove had suggested that meeting on the beach because Theresa had to come past this bar, and Coach Jones was waiting to ambush her, slipping some drug into her system so that tomorrow, in front of the entire world, she would fail.

A silly thought. But she found herself shuddering, if only because it was finally beginning to sink in...what was going to happen tomorrow...

She didn't speak, but Marlboro couldn't let the silence continue. After finishing his beer and ordering another, he leaned over and spoke quietly, with intensity. He told her, "You saw through me. I'll give you that. But you know something, young lady? You're not the only shrewd soul at this table."

"No?" she replied.

Softly. With an unexpected tentativeness.

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Then she forced herself to take a sip of her chilled water, licking her lips before asking, "What did you see in me?"

"Nothing," Marlboro said.

Then he leaned back and picked up the fresh beer glass, sucking down half of its contents before admitting, "I don't read you kids well. It's the muscles in your faces. They don't telephone emotions like they should."

She said, "Good."

He laughed again. Nothing was drunk about the man, but something about the eyes and mouth told her that he had been drinking for a long while. Nothing was drunk about the voice, but the words had even more sparkle and speed than usual. "Why do you think it is, young lady? All this noise and anguish about a game? A fucking little game that uses a hundred meters of grass and a ball that doesn't know enough to keep itself round?"

"I don't know — " she started.

"You're the favorite," he interrupted. "State is, I mean. According to polls, the general public hopes that I'm beat. You know why? Cause I've got twelve of you kids, and Rickover has only ten. And it takes eleven to play. Which means that on your team, at least one pure-human is always out there. He might be full of steroids and fake blood, and he's only going to last one set of downs, at most. But he's as close to being one of them butter-butts as anyone on either team. And those butter-butts, those fans of yours and mine, identify with Mr. Steroid. Which is why in their hearts they want Tech to stumble."

Theresa watched the dark eyes, the quick wide mouth. For some reason, she couldn't force herself to offer any comment, no matter how small.

"And there's that matter of coaches," said Marlboro. "I'm the godless one, and Rickover is God's Chosen, and I bet that's good enough for ten or twenty million churchgoers. They're putting their prayers on the good man."

She thought of those days last summer — the pain and humiliation of practically begging for a spot on the roster, all while that good man watched from a distance — and she secretly bristled. Less secretly, she took a deep breath, looking away and asking him finally, "If it isn't me, who? Who do you see through?"

"Parents," he said. Pointblank.

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"My folks?" she asked.

"And all the others too," Marlboro promised. Then he took a pull of beer, grinned and added, "They're pretty much the same. Sad fuck failures who want to bend the rules of biology and nature as much as they can, diluting their blood and their own talents, thinking that's what it takes for them to have genuinely successful children."

Theresa thought of her father's Christmas tantrum.

More beer, then Marlboro said, "Yeah, your parents. They're the same as the others. All of 'em brought you kids into existence, and only later, when it was too late, they realized what it meant. Like the poor Wildes. Their kid's designed for awesome strength and useful rage, and so much has gone so wrong that they can't get a moment's rest. They're scared. And with reason. They seem like nice people, but I guarantee you, young lady, that's what happens when you're torn up by guilt. You keep yourself sweet and nice, because if you falter, even for a second, who knows what you'll betray about your real self?"

Theresa sighed, then grudgingly finished her water. If there was a poison in this booth, it didn't come inside a thick blister of glass.

"Darling." A thick, slurring feminine voice broke the silence, saying, "Darling," a second time, with too much air. "Marl, honey."

A hand lay on the tabletop. Theresa found herself looking at it and at the fat diamond riding the ring finger. She asked herself what was wrong with that hand. It was too long, and its flesh wore a thin golden fur, and the fingernails were thick and curved and obviously sharp. Theresa blinked and looked up at the very young woman, and in that instant, the coach said, "My fiancée. Ivana Buckleman. Honey, this is the enemy. Theresa Varner — "

"How are you?" said the fiancée, a mouthful of cougar teeth giving the words that distinctive, airy sound. Then she offered the long hand, and the two women shook, nothing friendly about the gesture. With blue cat-eyes staring, Ivana asked, "Shouldn't you be asleep, miss? You've got a big day tomorrow."

Marlboro said nothing, drinking in the jealousy.

Theresa surrendered her place, then said, "Good luck, Coach."

He stared at her, and grinned, and finally said, "You know perfectly well, girl. There's no such bird."

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* * *

Coach Rickover was famous for avoiding pre-game pep talks. Football was war, and you did it. Or you didn't do it. But if you needed your emotions cranked up with colored lights, then you probably shouldn't be one of his players.

And yet.

Before the opening kickover, Rickover called everyone to the sideline. An acoustic umbrella was set up over the team, drowning out the roar of a hundred thousand fans and a dozen competing bands and the dull thunder of a passing storm. And with a voice that couldn't have been more calm, he told them, "Whatever happens tonight, I am extraordinarily proud of you. All of you. Ability is something given by God. But discipline and determination are yours alone. And after all my years in coaching, I can say without reservation, I've never been so proud and pleased with any team. Ever.

"Whatever happens tonight," he continued, "this is my final game. Tomorrow morning, I retire as your coach. The Lord has told me it's time. And you're first to hear the news. Not even my wife knows. Not my assistant coaches. Look at their faces, if you don't believe me."

Then looking squarely at Theresa, he added, "Whatever happens, I want to thank you. Thank you for teaching an old man a thing or two about heart, and spirit, and passion for a game that he thought he already knew...."

The umbrella was dismantled, the various thunders descending on them.

Theresa still disliked the man. But despite that hard-won feeling, or maybe because of it, a lump got up into her throat and refused to go away.

The kickoff set the tone.

Man O War received the ball deep in the end zone, dropped his head and charged, skipping past defenders, then blockers — 1-1-2041s, mostly — reaching his thirty-five meter line with an avenue open to Tech's end zone. But the Wildman slammed into him from the side, flinging that long graceful body across the side line and into the first row of seats, his big-cat speed and the crack of pads on pads causing a hundred thousand fans to go silent.

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State's top receiver couldn't play for the first set of downs. His broken left hand had to be set first, then secured in a cast.

Without Man O War, Theresa worked her team down to the enemy's forty. But for the first time that season, the opening drive bogged down, and she punted the ball past the end zone, and Tech's first possession started at their twenty.

Three plays, and they scored.

Mosgrove threw one perfect pass. Then the Wildman charged up the middle twice, putting his shoulders into defenders and twisting around whatever he couldn't intimidate. Playing ABM, Theresa tackled him on his second run. But they were five meters inside the end zone, and a referee fixed his yellow laser on her, marking her for a personal foul — a bizarre call considering she was the one bruised and bleeding here.

Man O War returned, and on the first play from scrimmage, he caught a sixty meter bullet, broke two tackles, and scored.

But the extra point was blocked.

7-6, read every giant holo board. In flickering, flame-colored numbers.

The next Tech drive ate up nearly seven minutes, ending with a three meter plunge up the middle. The Wildman was wearing the entire State team when he crossed the line — except for a pure-human boy whose collarbone and various ribs had been shattered, and who lay on the field until the medical cart could come and claim him.

14-6.

On the third play of State's next drive, Theresa saw linebackers crowding against the line, and she called an audible. The ball was snapped to her. And she instantly delivered it to Man O War, watching him pull it in and turn upfield, a half step taken when a whippet-like ABM hit the broken hand with his helmet, splitting both helmet and cast, the ball bouncing just once before a second whippet scooped it up and galloped in for a touchdown.

Tech celebrated, and Theresa trotted over to the sidelines. Rickover found her, and for the first time all year — for the first time in her life — her coach said, "That, young lady, was wrong. Was stupid. You weren't thinking out there."

21-6.

State's next possession ate up eight minutes, and it ended when the

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Wildman exploded through the line, driving Theresa into the ground and the ball into the air, then catching the ball as it fell into his chest, grinning behind the grillwork of his helmet.

Tech's following drive ended with three seconds left in the half.

28-6.

Both locker rooms were at the south end. The teams were leaving in two ragged lines, and Theresa was thinking about absolutely nothing. Her mind was as close to empty as she could make it. When a student jumped from the overhead seats, landing in the tunnel in front of her, she barely paused. She noticed a red smear of clothing, then a coarse, drunken voice. "Bitch," she heard. Then, "Do better! You goddamn owe me!" Then he began to make some comment about dog cocks, and that was when a massive hand grabbed him by an arm, yanking him off his feet, then throwing his limp body back into the anonymous crowd.

The Wildman stood in front of Theresa.

"She doesn't owe you fuck!" he was screaming. Looking up at hundreds of wide eyes and opened, horrorstruck mouths, he shouted, "None of us owes you shit! You morons! Morons! Morons!"

HALF-TIME needed to last long enough to sell a hundred happy products to the largest holo audience since the Mars landing, and to keep the energy level up in the dome, there was an elaborate show involving bands and cheerleaders from both schools, plus half a dozen puffy, middle-aged pop entertainers. It was an hour's reprieve, which was just enough time for Rickover to define his team's worst blunders and draw up elegant solutions to every weakness. How much of his speech sank home, Theresa couldn't say. She found herself listening more to the droning of the bilge pumps than to the intricacies of playing quarterback and ABM. A numbness was building inside her, spreading into her hands and cold toes. It wasn't exhaustion or fear. She knew how those enemies felt, and she recognized both festering inside her belly, safely contained. And it wasn't self-doubt, because when she saw Man O War taking practice snaps in the back of the locker room, she leaped to her feet and charged Rickover, ready to say, "You can, but you shouldn't! Give me another chance!"

But her rocketback beat her to him. Flexing the stiff hand inside the

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newest cast, Man O War admitted, "I can't hold it to pass. Not like I should."

Rickover looked and sounded like a man in absolute control.

He nodded, saying, "Fine." Then he turned to the girl and said, "We need to stop them on their opening drive, then hang close. You can, believe me, manage that."

Theresa looked at the narrowed corners of his eyes and his tight little mouth, the terror just showing. And she lied, telling him and herself, "Sure. Why not?"

Tech took the opening kickoff.

Coach Jones was grinning on the sidelines, looking fit and rested. Supremely confident. Smelling a blowout, he opened up with a passing attack. The long-armed Mosgrove threw a pair of twenty meter darts, then dropped back and flung for the end zone. Theresa stumbled early, then picked herself up and guessed, running hard for the corner, the whippet receiver leaping high and her doing the same blind, long legs driving her toward the sky as she turned, the ball hitting her chest, then her hands, then bouncing free, tumbling down into Man O War's long cupped arms.

State inherited the ball on the twenty.

After three plays and nine meters, they punted.

A palpable calm seemed to have infected the audience. People weren't exactly quiet, but their chatter wasn't directed at the game anymore. State supporters tucked into the south corner — where the piss-mouthed fellow had come from — found ways to entertain themselves. They chanted abuse at the enemy. "Moron, moron, moron!" they cried out as Tech moved down the field toward them. "Moron, moron, moron!"

If the Wildman noticed, it didn't show in the stony, inflexible face.

Or Theresa was too busy to notice subtleties, helping plug holes and flick away passes. And when the Wildman galloped up the middle, she planted and dropped a shoulder and hit him low on the shins.

A thousand drills on technique let her tumble the mountainous boy.

Alan fell, and Theresa's teammates would torpedo his exposed ribs and his hamstrings, using helmets as weapons, and sometimes more than helmets. One time, the giant man rose up out of the pile and staggered — just for a strange, what's-wrong-with-this-picture moment. A river of

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impossibly red blood was streaming from his neck. The field judge stopped the game to look at hands until he found long nails dipped in red, and a culprit. Tech was awarded fifteen meters with the personal foul, but for the next three plays, their running back sat on the sideline, his thick flesh being closed up by the team's medics.

Tech was on the eleven when he returned, breaking through the middle, into the open, then stumbling. Maybe for the first time in his life, his tired legs suddenly weighed what they really weighed. And when he went down hard, his ball arm was extended, and Theresa bent and scooped the treasure out of his hand and dashed twenty meters before one of the whippets leveled her.

For a long minute, she lay on her back on that mangled sod, listening to the relentless cheers, and trying to remember exactly how to breathe.

Tech's sideline was close. Pure-humans wearing unsoiled laser-blue uniforms watched her with a fan-like appreciation. This wasn't their game; they were just spectators here. Then she saw the Wildman trudge into view, his helmet slightly askew, the gait and the slope of his shoulders betraying a body that was genuinely, profoundly tired. For the first time in his brief life, Alan Wilde was exhausted. And Theresa halfway smiled, managing her first sip of real air as Marlboro Jones strode into view, cornering his star running back in order to tell him to goddamn please protect the fucking ball —

Alan interrupted him.

Growling. Theresa heard a hard low sound.

Jones grabbed his player's face guard, and he managed a chin-up, putting his face where it had to be seen. Then he rode the Wildman for a full minute, telling him, "You don't ever! Ever! Not with me, mister!" Telling him, "This is your fucking life! It's being played out right here! Right now!" Screaming at him, "Now sit and miss your life! Until you learn your manners, mister! You sit!"

Four plays later, Theresa dumped a short pass into her running back's hands, and he rumbled through a string of sloppy tackles, all the way into the end zone.

State tried for a two-point conversion, but they were stopped.

The score looked sloppy on the holo boards. 28-12.

* * *

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Tech's star returned for the next downs, but he was more like Alan than like the mythical Wildman. In part, there was a lack of focus. Theresa saw a confused rage in those giant, suddenly vulnerable eyes. But it was just as much exhaustion. Frayed muscles were having trouble lifting the dense, over-engineered bones, and the pounding successes of the first half were reduced to three meter gains and gouts of sod and black earth thrown toward the remote carbon-fiber roof.

State got the ball back late in the third quarter. Rickover called for a draw play, which might have worked. But in the huddle, Theresa saw how the defense was lining up, and she gave Man O War a few crisp instructions.

As the play began, her receiver took a few steps back.

Theresa flung the ball at a flat green spot midway between them, and it struck and bounced high, defenders pulling to a stop when they assumed the play was dead. Then Man O War grabbed the ball, and despite his cast, heaved the ball an ugly fifty meters, delivering its fluttering fat body into waiting hands.

Rickover wanted to try for two points.

Theresa called time-out, marched over to Rickover and said, "I can get us three." It meant setting up on the ten meter line. "I can smell it," she said. "They're starting to get really tired."

"Like we aren't?" Man O War piped in, laughing amiably as medics patched his cast.

The coach grudgingly agreed, then called a fumbleroosky. Theresa took the snap, bent low and set the live ball inside one of the sod's deep gouges. And her center, a likable and sweet pure-human named Mitch Long, grabbed up the ball and ran unnoticed and untroubled into the end zone.

28-21, and nobody could think for all the wild, proud cheering of pure-humans.

State managed to hold on defense.

Mosgrove punted, pinning them deep at their end with ten minutes left.

Theresa stretched the field with a towering, uncatchable pass, then started to run and dump little passes over the middle. The Wildman was

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playing linebacker, and he tackled her twice, the second blow leaving her chin cut open and her helmet in pieces. Man O War took over for a down. He bobbled the snap, then found his grip just in time for the Wildman to come over the center and throw an elbow into his face, shattering the reinforced mask as well as his nose.

Playing with two pure-humans at once, Theresa pitched to her running back, and he charged toward the sideline, wheeled and flung a blind pass back across the field. She snagged it and ran forty meters in three seconds. Then a whippet got an angle, and at the last moment pushed her out of bounds. But she managed to hold the ball out, breaking the orange laser beam rising from the pylon.

Finally, finally, the game was tied.

Marlboro called time out, then huddled with his 1-1-2041s. There wasn't even the pretense of involving the rest of the team. Theresa watched the gestures, the coach's contorting face. Then Tech seemed to shake off its collective fatigue, putting together a prolonged drive, the Wildman scoring on a tough run up the middle and Mosgrove kicking the extra point with just a minute and fifty seconds left.

35-28.

Rickover gathered his entire team around him, stared at their faces with a calming, messianic intensity. Then without uttering a word, he sent eleven of them out to finish the game.

The resulting drive consumed the entire one hundred and ten seconds.

From the first snap, Theresa sensed what was happening here and what was inevitable. When Man O War dropped a perfect soft pass, she could assure him, "Next time." And as promised, he one-handed a dart over his shoulder on the next play, gaining fifteen. Later, following a pair of hard sacks, it was fourth and thirty, and Theresa scrambled and pumped faked twice, then broke downfield, one of the whippets catching her, throwing his hard little body at her belly. But she threw an elbow, then a shoulder, making their first down by nothing and leaving the defender unconscious for several minutes, giving the medics something to do while her team breathed and made ready.

Thirty meters came on a long sideline pattern.

Fifteen were lost when the Wildman drove through the line and

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chased Theresa back and forth for a week, then downed her with a swing of an arm.

But she was up and functioning first. Alan lay on the ground gasping, that wide elephantine face covered with perspiration and its huge tongue panting and an astonished glaze numbing the eyes.

Tech called time-out.

Mitch brought in the next three plays.

He lasted for one. Another pure-human was inserted the next down, and the next, and that was just to give them eleven bodies. The thin-skinned, frail-boned little boys were bruised and exhausted enough to stagger. Mitch vomited twice before he got back to the sidelines, bile and blue pills scattered on the grass. The next boy wept the entire time he was with them. Then his leg shattered when the Wildman ran over him. But every play was a gain, and they won their next first down, and there was an entire sixteen seconds left and forty meters to cross and Theresa calmly used their last time-out and joined Rickover, knowing the play that he'd call before he could say it.

She didn't hear one word from her coach, nodding the whole time while gazing off into the stands.

Fans were on their feet, hoarsely cheering and banging their hands together. The drunks in the corner had fashioned a crude banner, and they were holding it high, with pride, shouting the words with the same dreary rage.

"MORON, MORON, MORON," she read.

She heard.

The time-out ended, and Theresa trotted back out and looked at the faces in the huddle, then with an almost quiet voice asked, "Why are turds tapered?"

Then she said, "To keep our assholes from slamming shut."

Then she gave the play, and she threw twenty meters to Man O War, and the clock stopped while the markers moved themselves, and she threw the ball into the sod, halfway burying it to stop the universe once again.

Two seconds.

She called a simple crossing pattern.

But Coach Jones guessed it and held his people back in coverage.

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Nobody was open enough to try forcing it, which was why she took off running. And because everyone was sloppy tired, she had that advantage, twisting out of four tackles and head-faking a whippet, then finding herself in the corner with Alan Wilde standing in front of her, barring the way to the goal line.

She dropped her shoulder, charging as he took a long step forward and braced himself, pads and her collarbone driving into the giant man's groin, the exhausted body pitched back and tumbling and her falling on top of him, lying on him as she would lie on a bed, then rolling, off the ground until she was a full meter inside the end zone.

She found her legs and her balance, and almost too late, she stood up.

Alan was already on his feet. She saw him marching past one of the officials, his helmet on the ground behind him, forgotten, his gaze fixed on that MORON banner and the people brandishing it in front of him.

Some were throwing small brown objects at him.

Or maybe at all the players, it occurred to her.

Theresa picked up the bone-shaped dog treat, a part of her astonished by the cruel, calculated planning that went into this new game.

Carried by a blistering rage, Alan began running toward the stands, screaming, "You want to see something funny, fucks? Do you?"

Do nothing, and State would likely win.

But Theresa ran anyway, hitting Alan at the knees, bringing him down for the last time.

A yellow laser struck her — a personal foul called by the panicked referee.

Theresa barely noticed, yanking off her helmet and putting her face against that vast, fury-twisted face, and like that, without warning, she gave him a long, hard kiss.

"Hey, Alan," she said. "Let's just have some fun here. Okay?"

A couple thousand Tech fans, wrongly thinking that the penalty ended the game and the game was won, stampeded into the far end of the field.

In those next minutes, while penalties and the crowd were sorted out, the 1-1-2041s stood together in the end zone, surrounding the still fuming Wildman. And watching the mayhem around them, Theresa

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said, "I wish." Then she said it again — "I wish!" — with a loud, pleading voice.

"What are you wishing for?" asked Man O War.

She didn't know what she wanted. When her mouth opened, her conscious mind didn't have the simplest clue what she would say. Theresa was just as surprised as the others when she told them, "I wish they were gone. All these people. This is our game, not theirs. I want to finish it. By ourselves, and for ourselves. Know what I mean?"

The 1-1-2041s nodded.

Smiled.

The rebellion began that way, and it culminated moments later when a whippet asked, "But seriously, how can we empty this place out?"

Theresa knew one way, and she said it. Not expecting anything to come of her suggestion.

But Alan took it to heart, saying, "Let me do it."

He took a step, arguing, "I'm strongest. And besides, if I'm caught, it doesn't mean anything. It's just the Wildman's usual shit."

Police in riot gear were busy fighting drunks and bitter millionaires. The running back slipped off in the direction of the locker room, as unnoticed as any blood-caked giant could be. Then after a few moments, as the crowds were finally herded back into the stands, Marlboro Jones came over and looked straight at Theresa, asking everyone, "Where is he?"

No one spoke.

Rickover was waving at his team, asking them to join him.

Theresa felt a gnawy guilt as well as an effervescent thrill.

Marlboro shook his head, his mouth starting to open, another question ready to be ignored —

Then came the roaring of alarms and a fusillade of spinning red lights. Over the public address system, a booming voice said, "There is nothing to worry about. Please, please, everyone needs to leave the dome *now! Now!* In an orderly fashion, please follow the ushers *now!*"

Within fifteen minutes, the dome was evacuated.

Coaching staffs and most of the players were taken to the helipad and lifted back to the mainland, following the media's hasty retreat.

Twenty minutes after the emergency began, the 1-1-2041s came out

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of their hiding places. The sidelines were under sea water, but the field itself was high enough to remain mostly dry. Security people and maintenance crews could be heard in the distance. Only emergency lights burned, but they were enough. Looking at the others, Theresa realized they were waiting for her to say something.

"This is for us," she told them. "And however it turns out, we don't tell. Nobody ever hears the final score. Agreed?"

Alan said, "Good," and glared at the others, his fists bleeding from beating all those bilge pumps to death.

Man O War cried out, "Let's do it then!"

In the gloom, the teams lined up for a two-point play. State had ten bodies, and including the whippet still groggy from being unconscious, Tech had its full twelve.

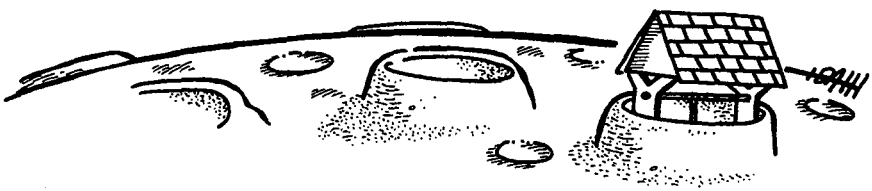
Fair enough.

Theresa leaned low, and in a whisper, called the only appropriate play.

"Go out for a pass," she told her receivers and her running back. "I'll think of something."

She settled behind the minotaur playing center, and she nestled her hands into that warm damp groin, and after a long gaze at the empty stands, she said, "Hey."

She said, "When you're ready. Give it here." ☙



Further evidence of water on the Moon.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Lake Dreams the Sky, by Swain Wolfe, Cliff Street Books/ HarperCollins), 1999, $13.

MANY columns back we discussed Swain Wolfe's first novel, *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*, a gentle, secondary world fantasy that would not have been amiss sitting on a bookshelf beside Patricia McKillip's work. This time out Wolfe tells a more contemporary story of a Boston career woman returning to her childhood home where she hopes to regain the sense that there is a purpose to life, a feeling she once had as a young woman, but has since lost.

The childhood home is by a lake in Montana where her grandmother still lives, and for the first few pages we get to see them awkwardly interact with each other in this rambling old house, filled with so many magazines and newspapers that it makes simple navigation somewhat of a chore. But while this is an important aspect to the novel, the main meat of the tale — and what's told at much longer length — is of a post-World War II romance between Rose, a waitress who has returned to the lake to care for the local Native woman who raised her, and Cody, a drifting handyman and painter.

The sections detailing Rose and Cody's relationship, their schemes to make some money, how they deal with the increasing hostility to their relationship by both the townspeople and that of the local Natives, as well as Wolfe's depictions of the honest, but hard-working poor, reminded me of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* (a good thing, since they're a pair of my all-time favorite books). But added to the quirkiness of people living in their cars, and schemes going terribly awry, is a magical element as well.

There is a snake named Loneliness living in the bottom of the

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lake. Rose used to talk to crows, and got answers. The lake is set on fire, literally and figuratively. In short, mythologies and old beliefs rise up through the sensible prose to wash over the real world. The final scene in Rose and Cody's story is pure magic, but I don't want to say any more than that for fear of spoiling it for those of you who might go on to read the novel.

And what of that Boston career woman and her grandmother? Their story ties into the old in a manner at once expected, but no less satisfying for that.

This is a deep, lyric book, with many layers, characters you'll fall in love with, and scenes that will remain with you for a very long time. It proves that the shimmering beauty of *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* was no fluke and makes me eagerly look forward to what Wolfe will offer to us next.

The High House, by James Stoddard, Warner, 1998, $6.50.

This book came to my box, not from the publisher, but courtesy of a reader of this column in Cincinnati who also works in a bookstore. I'll admit to being dubious of his enthusiastic recommendation (I get a *lot* of books sent to me with enthusiastic recommendations attached), but it turned out my correspondent had come upon a real treasure. My first clue was the warm reference to Lin Carter's Sign of the Unicorn imprint for Ballantine, immediately followed by a George MacDonald epigraph, references to William Morris, Lord Dunsany and the like in the text, a character named after William Hope Hodgson....

In other words, here we have a fantasy inspired, not by Tolkien and his legion of clones, but by some of the other pioneering fantasists who are largely ignored today: the above mentioned, along with James Branch Cabell, Mervyn Peake, and E. R. Eddison, to name only a few. And when I say "inspired," I don't mean slavishly imitating, but rather inspired in the best sense of the word. A tip of the hat here, a sly reference there, not to mention ably taking up the challenge of giving readers an original story with all the sense of wonder so many of us first found in the work of those earlier writers.

There has never been a house such as that of the book's title — a vast, sprawling edifice that is so large, different areas have their own weather, climate, fauna and such. In short, a world of a house. To it,

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after years of absence, comes Carter Anderson, son of the house's Master, summoned to take up the mantle of Steward after his father's disappearance.

More than anything, Anderson wants to find his father, but Anarchists (led by a faceless man who most often appears dressed as an English Bobby) have other plans, and Anderson finds himself defending the house against their attacks. Then there's the problem of an evil stepmother and her son, a dragon in one of the attics, feral furniture, and the fact that the house appears to be the world in microcosm — by which I mean, if the house is in good repair, then so is the greater world beyond its doors, but if the lamps aren't all lit, the clocks not all wound, it has dire consequences for both the house and our world.

James Stoddard writes with an assurance that belies the fact that this is only his first novel. His characters are warm and engaging, his High House a constant delight (and really, as much of a character as any of those more mobile), and best of all, one never quite knows where the story is going — and that's something of a rarity in what's marketed as fantasy novels these days. Yes, there are expected elements, but they are things we *want* to have happen, so they're not disappointments; for the most part, the novel remains a constant surprise and delight right to the end.

Without question, *The High House* is one of my favorite books of the year, as much for reminding me what it was that I loved about fantasy novels in the first place as for its own merits. Now I'm going to go back and reread some classics (which is what I remember doing before the proliferation of sequels and prequels came to swell the shelves of bookstores).

The Princess Bride, by William Goldman, Ballantine, 1998, $24.95.

And speaking of classics, one could do worse than reread this hilarious novel by William Goldman, his "good parts" version of "S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure." If you've only seen the film, do yourself a favor and read the original text which is even better than what later provided the script for a very fine movie.

This 25th anniversary edition lacks the colored text of the original hardcover (Goldman's insertions were in red ink, rather than italics), but it makes up for that by including the first chapter of the

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"long-lost sequel, *Buttercup's Baby*," as well as Goldman's explanation as to how he only got to write one chapter of the sequel, rather than the whole book itself. (Until I read the latter, I'd never known that Stephen King could speak Florinese, little say translate a book's worth of text into English...but I digress.)

For those of you unfamiliar with *The Princess Bride* in either of its incarnations, the novel purports to have its basis in a book that Goldman's father read to him when he was a child. Later, when he was able to read it on his own, Goldman was shocked to find it to be a long, dull book...unless one only read the "good parts" as his father had done to him. So, in the spirit of good storytelling, he was kind enough to edit a similar version for us.

What's perhaps surprising about a farce such as this is that the actual story is as good as the jokes are funny: sweet, tender, adventurous, and yes, humorous. If you've never read it before, you're in for a real treat.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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"Let's go, Denmore. The free-range chickens are stampeding towards the canyon!"

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Bag of Bones, by Stephen King, Scribner, $28.

THE KING & US

I LIVE IN Maine, about an hour south and east of Bangor, and I can tell you, Stephen King is an iconic figure in these here hills. Equal parts Robin Hood, George Bailey, and populist Shakespeare, King is king, and everyone I know has a story about him: the aging hippies who've made a part-time career of being extras in his movies; the midlist mystery writer who claims that in the mid-1980s, the interior of King's office looked like the final scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, choked with boxed manuscripts from aspiring novelists and hopeful editors awaiting blurbs; the guy who used to clean my chimney, a man I came to think of as The World's Foremost Authority, whose opinions on everything from global warming to house construction were as adamant as they were utterly daft. When it came to Stephen King, The World's Foremost Authority grew absolutely eloquent, nearly apoplectic with eloquence; because he knew the *truth*, you see, the real god's honest *truth* about Stephen King. And one day the whole world would know what he knew, and when it did —

Well, that was best left to the imagination, like the rest of the Authority's chaotic theories. What he shared with me, not once but many times over the years, was that he had it on *absolute unassailable authority* that Stephen King did not write any of his books. Oh, maybe the first one, *Carrie* —

What about those early stories? I interrupted, *the ones in* Gallery *and* Cavalier? (I'd been so impressed by them in the *Night Shift* collection that I sent my own fledgling efforts to the same magazines, receiving the only hand-written and kindly intentioned rejection letter

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of my early career: "I enjoyed your story but we are more interested in SEX.")

The Authority allowed, grudgingly, that King might have written one or two of those; but as for the rest —

Well, he said, lowering his voice as a black hail of creosote spattered down from the chimney, *they were all written by other people.*

Oh, you must mean the Richard Bachman books, I said. *Stephen King wrote those under a pseudonym —*

No. The Authority shook his head and stomped his long-handled brush on the floor. *I mean he's got an entire factory of people writing for him. Friend of mine saw it, once. Buncha people livin' in trailers over t' Veazie. They write the books, he pays 'em, then they get published under* his *name.* Stephen King, the Authority repeated in a cold voice, and gave me a baleful look. *And anyone ever mentions the truth about it, well, he just shuts 'em up. I know.*

Well, I've only lived here for eleven years, but even *I* know better than to argue with a native about Stephen King. Though I'm unsure as to what the Authority would make of *Bag of Bones,* King's most recent book. It's long, and it was written fast — in just over eight months, if we go by the novel's dated coda — and it is, ostensibly, a horror novel. But even this is up for debate, since the book's (unaccustomably subdued) jacket declares *Bag of Bones* to be "A Haunted Love Story." This from the man who had a huge seller with a book titled *It*?

Ah, but identifying Stephen King is a game that moves as you play it. The fact is, the iconic figure Stephen King most resembles at this point is Rhett Butler. Not the whoring, rum-running, craftily grinning Rhett; not Rhett in the passionate clinch, nor Rhett striding coolly away down that tree-lined street while Scarlett looks desperately after him. I'm talking about the other, more mature Rhett, the one tipping his hat to sidewalk society and earnestly taking the advice of every old bluestocking biddy he meets, the Rhett who at midlife has found new purpose and a new passion — to make sure his baby daughter gets the respect he never had. Substitute *Bag of Bones* for Bonnie Blue Butler, and you have the makings of a millennial American folktale: the second act reinvention of Stephen King as a beloved, respected and — drumroll, please — remarkably fine American writer.

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Because, good as *Bag of Bones* is — and it's very, very, good — what is even better is the thought that it is the harbinger of more books to come. This may seem an ironic utterance, considering the veritable Fibber Magee's Closet of Stephen King works that have preceded this one. Over thirty books, as stated on the jacket of his newest one, the first published by Scribner. A few of these books are named, but what is more interesting is the somber invocation of King's university education, his O. Henry Award, his devotion to the causes of literacy and writing. King's recent contributions to *The New Yorker*, an intriguing yet flawed short story in the summer fiction issue, and a hauntingly elegiacal essay in its winter counterpart, seem to wrap it all up with a nice big shiny red bow. After almost twenty-five years, innumerable film adaptations, legions of devoted readers and 500 gazillion books in print, Stephen King has finally arrived as an author to be taken seriously.

In its plotting and characterization, *Bag of Bones* doesn't veer too far from that wide well-traveled King's Road that hies from *Carrie* to *The Green Mile*. The protagonist, Mike Noonan, is a successful writer, "V. C. Andrews with a prick," as some wag tags him (though I do wonder if a millionaire author whose books regularly turn up on the bestseller lists — even those that extend all the way down to fifteen — can realistically be termed "a midlist writer"). Four years earlier, Mike's beloved wife, Jo, died of an aneurysm outside of Rite-Aid. Among her effects, Mike found a just-purchased home pregnancy kit. The discovery gives an even crueler icy sheen to Mike's grief, since the couple had desperately wanted children and he hadn't known she was pregnant. In the aftermath of Jo's death, the formerly prolific Mike develops an unsettlingly resistant case of writer's block (for those of us toiling in those reaches of the industry somewhat beyond even the Number Fifteen Spot, this is one of the scarier parts of the book, and the only one that actually disturbed my rest); fortunately, he has a few spare manuscripts rattling around in his safe deposit box, and for a few years he's able to coast along comfortably on those.

But time comes when the last bottom-drawer novel has been parcelled out to his agent, and Mike still hasn't started writing again. Stalling requests from his agent and editor, and hoping that the move

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will re-energize him, Mike leaves the home in Derry, Maine, that he shared with Jo, and lights out for the Territory — unincorporated Township TR-90, or the TR, as locals call it.

The TR is in western Maine, a region that has acted as a sort of dark Neverland not just for King but Carolyn Chute and the lesser-known Michael Rothschild, writers who have also drawn on this harsh landscape and the insularity and occasional sheer orneriness of its inhabitants. Once there, Noonan settles in at Sara Laughs, a rambling log structure built at the turn of the century and named for Sara Tidwell, the legendary black blues and gospel singer who briefly made it her home nearly a hundred years earlier, and whose belting voice and contagious joie d'esprit could not save her from the rigid caste structures and hatreds of small town New England.

Sara Laughs is haunted — no surprise — but King does his usual deft job of juggling one's doubts as to just *who* is doing the haunting, and why. Is it Jo? Sara Tidwell? The ghost of the recently deceased young man who left an uncommonly pretty twenty-one-year-old trailer-trash widow and four-year-old daughter living in a double-wide down the road from Mike? Mysterious messages appear on the refrigerator, screams and bumps are heard in the night; but the real mystery is whether or not Mike will sleep with widowed Mattie, the first woman he's fancied (okay, he really *loves* her) since Jo died.

Ah, but Mattie is trouble; rather, she's *in* trouble, since her father-in-law is the horrible Max Devore, an eighty-five-year-old software mogul who wants custody of his little granddaughter Kyra. If Devore is Charles Foster Kane, Kyra is Rosebud, and Devore will stop at nothing to get his wizened claws on her.

That's pretty much it as far as plot synopsis goes; any more and I would do readers the disservice of revealing who gets it in the neck, the groin, the throat, the heart. Suffice to say that there are pyrotechnics and terrible storms, drownings and near-drownings in Dark Score Lake, reversals of fate and fortune, revelations of dark deeds done when the century was new, and innocents paying the price now that the century is dying. Standard Stephen King stuff, in other words.

What is extraordinary here is how good the writing is. I'm neither a diehard fan nor a Stephen King snob: over the decades I've liked his

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short stories very much, loved his nonfiction book *Danse Macabre*, but found his novels frustrating. Too long, too flaccid, too many bloody eyeballs and boogers and intestines crackling like kielbasa on a Weber grill before they burst. My frustration grew, reading later works like *Rose Madder*, because King's writing was so obviously getting leaner, more elegant and more mature; but still there were those interminable Grand Guignol segments, and the aggravating suspicion that no one was editing them.

I have no idea what's happened with *Bag of Bones*. Has King simply shucked all that boogery kid stuff? Does he have a more stringent editor? Or — this is kind of a scary thought — has he actually been this good all along, just stringing his millions of fans out for all these years? *Has Stephen King just been toying with us*?

No matter. I didn't skim through *Bag of Bones* at all; I loved it. The characterizations are plummy, the dialogue sharp, and even the ghosts play second fiddle to Mike Noonan and his genuinely anguished midlife crisis. There are sly references to Melville, M.R. James, Somerset Maugham, Daphne du Maurier, Elmore Leonard, Lafcadio Hearn, George Seferis, and Thomas Hardy (take *that*, nose-in-the-air literary critics). And yes, I think that Stephen King *is* toying with us here — all those rumors of bottom-drawer novels, all those characters from other King books, pretending to write while going slowly mad in wintry places; all those mean-spirited reviews from the mainstream press, decrying King's success and blaming his books for falling literacy rates when they should have been keeping an eye on mean Bill Gates (take *that*, Max Devore). The real happy ending, of course, is both fitting and ironic: *Bag of Bones* is a terrific book that has garnered serious reviews for its author, and it's *still* in the Number Two spot on the *Times* Bestseller List.

Meanwhile, here in Maine, Stephen and Tabitha King quietly go on doing good deeds for the university system, the library system, the Arts and Good Old Fashioned Sports. In Bangor one day around Christmas, I saw this message posted on a signboard outside the municipal baseball field:

THANK YOU STEVE AND TABBY FOR A GREAT 98

Later that afternoon, when we stopped for lunch at a downtown café, an elderly man dressed as Santa

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Claus came into the restaurant and cheerfully worked the room, talking with children and giving out candy canes as their beaming parents watched.

"Hey, look!" said my companion. "It's Stephen King!"

It wasn't, really; but six weeks earlier I had glimpsed King, narrating "Peter and the Wolf" at a Halloween benefit for the Bangor Symphony. The performance was at the Bangor Civic Center, a cavernous gymnasium that usually hosts state basketball playoffs, and the place was *packed* — the only thing I can compare it to was seeing another hometown sweetheart, Bruce Springsteen, playing in another gym twenty-odd years ago. Anyway, I went backstage at intermission with a friend who's a violinist in the symphony, and there was Stephen King, standing in a doorway and saying nice things to all the musicians, looking rather shy and very tall and — yes — incredibly buff in tight white T-shirt and jeans. The burly, beer-drinking working-class hero of *Carrie* and *The Shining* and *The Stand* had been replaced by Jeremy Irons.

"Go ahead — say hi to him," my violinist friend urged. "He's wonderful, he's really *so* nice, go say hello — "

But I didn't. Too shy myself, I guess. Plus, once Stephen King knows that *I* know about all those poor writers toiling in trailers up in Veazie — well, don't say I didn't warn you.

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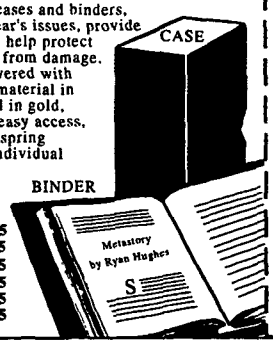

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Albert Cowdrey recalls that his interest in fantasy began with his father, an accountant who read aloud the works of Edgar Allan Poe to his young son. On some level then, we know whom to thank for this ghost story in the classic mode (although you won't find any barking dogs here).

Mr. Cowdrey is an historian with eight books to his credit. Although he has taught at Tulane and at the University of New Orleans, he says his real profession is hunting down new restaurants (which could indeed be a full-time job in the Crescent city).

Revenge

By Albert E. Cowdrey

THE RAIN WAS SLOW AND cold and persistent — really, thought Mrs. Zahl, a Yankee sort of rain, not like the usual New Orleans gullywasher. In the foyer she slipped off her transparent rain cape and threw it over the halltree; she kicked off her wet shoes and padded into the semidark sitting room in her damp stocking feet, thinking only of bourbon and rest. Really; the Preservation Society — how tiresome good works were!

Actually, she went for the human contact. Only...humans were so unsatisfactory, as a rule. It would almost be better to start going to Mass again, where people kept their silly opinions to themselves, except, of course, the priest.

Mrs. Zahl turned on a small lamp with painted hunters and bounding prey and mixed herself a stiff Old Fashioned at Charlie's memorial wetbar. Here that comfort-seeking man had lived and, with stunning appropriateness, had died in the very act of raising his glass toward his wife's contemptuous face and saying, "Cheers, darling."

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Fatigued and depressed, Mrs. Zahl felt suddenly that everything in her life was dying out. This gloomy insight brought thoughts of her son. When dear Sam, her only child, moved to Cleveland with his wife (Mrs. Zahl never thought of Marian as her daughter-in-law, or anything else lawful) the remoteness would become — well —

Unbearable was not in Mrs. Zahl's vocabulary, for she believed that anything can be borne if one is made of the right stuff, but after some fumbling in her mental thesaurus, she came up with the word "difficult." Yes. Life would be *difficult* without Sam and the grandchildren. Very. Then, as she was laying out a game of Solitaire next to the drink on a little mahogany table, a new sort of chill struck her.

Oh dear, she thought, it's just Charlie's sort of weather, isn't it? The shadows. And of course she was feeling down, too, and that often contributed to his, if that was the word, apparitions.

Hastily she got up and went to let Shiloh out of the cellar. Should have done it anyway, the poor creature had been there for hours. And in fact the toy collie was waiting just inside the cellar door, not barking of course, Mrs. Zahl had fixed that long ago, but bright-eyed, smiling, and Mrs. Zahl smiled back with affection and relief. She knelt down and she and her silent dog communed for a few long wet minutes, and then she got stiffly to her feet and returned to the living room with Shiloh romping around her.

Another minute, and Mrs. Zahl was filled with a dawning sense of comfort, with the cards in her hand, another gulp of Old Fashioned spreading warmth into her toes, and Shiloh's hot little triangular chin resting in her lap. She was just thinking about turning on the television for the five-thirty news when Charlie appeared.

There was no sound to catch her attention, yet she turned her head as if someone had slapped her hard across the face. In the same instant Shiloh raised her head and then sprang off the sofa with a scrabble of hard claws on the polished flooring. From the dark hallway where Mrs. Zahl had gone to open the cellar door, Charlie appeared bluishly, like a gas flame, pottering along in his well-known weaving walk that had always given him the look of being smashed even when he wasn't.

Mrs. Zahl was not afraid of Charlie dead any more than she had been of Charlie living, but she had to admit to herself — she was a woman who

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valued truth and above all self-knowledge — that the thought of possibly being *touched* by a man who had been dead fourteen years filled her with horror. Fortunately, Charlie had never presumed so far. He came, as usual, just to the edge of the lamplight, while Shiloh, all a-quiver, approached him at a kind of trembling ramrod point, one paw raised and nose and tail stretched out, longing to sniff but never quite daring to touch this flickering blue semblance of a man she had never known in the flesh.

As usual, he didn't look directly at Mrs. Zahl, but turned obliquely and pottered into the shadow cast by his old upright sectional desk against the wall. She waited breathlessly, half expecting him to pull his Newman High School yearbook out of the glass case that formed the top section of the desk. The book contained his picture as a young tennis star in blinding whites, a picture so stunningly unprophetic of the man he became that Mrs. Zahl occasionally took it down herself, simply to stare in wonder at the gleaming butterfly that had somehow reversed the usual process of metamorphosis and ended up a large slow worm.

But as usual, he vanished into the shadow and was gone, perhaps passing through the wall into the wet garden outside where the hangdog flowers awaited the first freeze and the sundial displayed its possibly threatening message, *Time Takes All But Memories*. Shiloh spent several minutes running about and would certainly have made the welkin ring, whatever a welkin was, with her barking if she had been able. Thank God I had both ends of her fixed while I was at it, thought Mrs. Zahl, beginning, with shaking hands, again to lay out her game of Solitaire.

Eventually Shiloh came back and put her head in her mistress's lap, and all was calm again until the old Seth Thomas chimed seven. Then Mrs. Zahl called Shiloh into the kitchen, heated up some storebought gumbo, steamed a cup of rice, and dividing dinner into two equal parts, gave one to her dog before settling down to eat the other half herself. Distinctly, she felt she needed something warm inside. They both did.

The haunting of Mrs. Zahl had developed gradually, somewhat like the process by which the British Commonwealth had emerged from the British Empire. As her fleshly companions disappeared, ghostly ones arrived to remind her of them, though scarcely in a satisfactory or comforting way.

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Mrs. Zahl's sister Jodie had been a persistent ghost, mooning around the upper hall for months and months and months after her death. Alice Watts had been a surprise, considering that she and Mrs. Zahl had never been close in life, but she had faded out after three or four weeks of intermittently dwelling in the hall closet among Sam's retired bats and racquets and the plastic-wrapped ornaments that Mrs. Zahl no longer bothered to put on a tree since Sam's wife had stopped the children from coming over for Christmas.

Once a completely strange ghost had wandered in off the street, a ratty-looking old man in a pea jacket, but had met with so freezing a reception that he never returned. Oddest of all had been the ghost of her previous dog Casey, drawn, Mrs. Zahl believed, by the fact that Shiloh was permitted to go into heat once before she was fixed. In any case, after the vet performed the operation Casey did not return.

Trying to explain to her therapist once what a ghost looked like, Mrs. Zahl had said that it looked as if someone had defaced a nice, solid oil painting of a room with a few hasty thin strokes of water color that left the original scene perfectly visible behind them. The therapist had told her she was hallucinating and that it was not uncommon for the bereaved to do so during the "denial" phase of grieving.

Mrs. Zahl had told him not to be silly. Much as she loved her sister, she had never been able to forgive Jodie for an incident involving a stolen corsage that had happened in 1956. In fact, she had skipped the denial phase altogether with Jodie, going straight from her initial shock to acceptance. She hadn't grieved for Alice Watts at *all*, just sent a wreath and removed her from the Rolodex. Casey was a dear fellow, but after all he was getting on when the BMW hit him and Shiloh was such a comfort. As for Charlie, she had accepted his death a long time ago as God's will or whoever's. Besides, Shiloh saw the ghosts too, and did the therapist suppose that the dog was in "denial"?

Of all the ghosts only Charlie endured, and it was understandable; after all, this was his home, too. Mrs. Zahl felt that as long as he wanted to come, she would have to put up with him — after all, he had given her Sam. And yet, and yet. Even more than before his death Charlie represented another dissatisfaction in a life that was too rich in them. Only her innate strength of character enabled Mrs. Zahl to let Charlie keep coming

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back, for she was certain that if she flatly commanded him to be gone, he would potter a last time through the wall and go haunt someplace else, such as his locker at the Uptown Lawn Tennis Club (or more likely his favorite booth at the Members' Bar) where he felt at home.

Or, she wondered suddenly as she ate her supper, was her kindness a sign of *weakness*? During life, she had been perfectly content for him to stay in the club for days at a time, but now she preferred him even as he was, even with the feeling of dread that accompanied him, to nothing at all.

She and Shiloh finished the gumbo, which was surprisingly so-so for a product of Kielmeyer's, known locally as The Rich Folks' Deli. Even before Mrs. Zahl was done, a bubble of gastric distress switched on like a pilot light, kindling dark thoughts in her midriff — long ago identified by the Greeks as the dwelling place of the soul, and *certainly* the dwelling place of the soul among the natives of New Orleans.

"Really," said that strong but unhappy lady as she collected Shiloh's well-licked dish to place beside her own in the dishwasher, "how much am I supposed to put up with?"

Shiloh tried to answer, but of course couldn't.

THE PHONE RANG about eleven, when Mrs. Zahl was already in bed with the lamp on and a *New York Times* crossword puzzle book propped on her knees. It was Sam, sounding — as was customary for him these days — distressed and more than a little drunk. After perfunctory greetings he began to whine, as usual.

"They say you turn into your father as you get older. God, do you think so, Mama?"

"I don't think you could ever be a great deal like Charlie, dear. Except your nose, of course — that's very definitely from your Dad."

"I just don't seem to — "

He hesitated, and Mrs. Zahl effortlessly supplied the words that he was thinking: Be able to cope. Be able to make decisions. That remark about turning into his father gave her a little cold chill.

"Don't seem to what, dear?" she asked a little unsteadily.

"Oh, I don't know. Stay sober, for one thing. I just keep having the

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feeling this move isn't a good idea, I shouldn't be doing it, and yet I'm committed now and the process just rolls along. "

"I know you hate to leave New Orleans."

"Well, I do, and yet it's a big opportunity as Marian keeps telling me. Get into the corporate headquarters and forge ahead and so on and so on. I keep thinking, is forging ahead what I really want to do? Besides, it's cold up there in Cleveland, you know? Really cold."

He sounded like a child and she let him babble on. Tomorrow he'd be ashamed of crying on his mother's shoulder. Meanwhile a second track in her mind thought about Sam as Charlie and Charlie as Sam. Could it be that Charlie had once been a decent, hapless Sam, and that he had sunk into booze and acquiescence as his spouse first took charge of his life and then despised him for allowing her to do so?

This living alone, she thought — introspection is the very devil!

"Where are you calling from?" she asked, more or less at random.

"From home. I'm in the den."

"Oh? Where's Marian?"

Shiloh, catching her mistress's tone, raised her chin from the bed where she had settled down in her accustomed spot.

"Damn, didn't I tell you? She's in Cleveland seeing about the new house we're buying. I've got so much stuff to clean up here I couldn't go, and we've got Mrs. Annunciata to take care of the kids while she's gone."

Mrs. Annunciata, thought Mrs. Zahl, not me. The withdrawal of her grandchildren had been slow, a kind of Chinese water torture, with no break, no quarrel to explain it. When she realized what was happening, Mrs. Zahl had humiliated herself, almost groveling to Marian in hopes of stopping the process. And Marian had smiled, accepted the groveling, demanded more, and squeezed her steadily out of the children's lives.

At that recollection, all of Mrs. Zahl's vague unhappiness seemed to condense into an emotion that was no less dark but considerably harder.

"And she's flying back tomorrow?"

"Oh, you know Marian. Everything planned to the split second. She'll be leaving Cleveland about four-thirty or five tomorrow morning, pick up her car here when she gets in at seven-five, and drive herself home. I'll have gone to the office when she arrives and we may get to see each other tomorrow night if we're lucky."

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"Goodness," said Mrs. Zahl. "That means she'll be driving in the morning rush, and they're predicting more rain and a freeze by dawn."

"She's a very good driver, Mama."

"But very fast."

Eventually he ran down and Mrs. Zahl urged him to sleep well and rang off. She remained thoughtful and the crossword puzzle book lay on her knees unworked, even though as a rule she was too conscientious ever to start a puzzle without finishing it.

After a while Mrs. Zahl laid aside the book and got up so quietly that Shiloh, sleeping peacefully at the foot of the bed in a hillock of mauve quilt, at first didn't register the fact. The dog only woke and came skittering after her when she extracted her winter robe from the closet with a jangle of wire coathangers.

Mrs. Zahl padded in soft mules through the bedroom door to the head of the stairs and began to descend slowly, without putting on a light. The stairs creaked, and when she was halfway down, a huge gust of wind buffeted the house as the predicted cold front arrived.

Mrs. Zahl muttered to herself, or perhaps to Shiloh, "It's just his kind of weather."

At length she stood in the dark sitting room where she had sipped her drink and eaten dinner, listening to the rain and wind hit the windows together and make the old wooden sashes leap against the frames. The house leaked like a sieve, always had, and little snakes of cold slithered over her ankles and poked exploring tongues up her calves under the nightgown and the robe. After fifteen minutes she was thoroughly chilled and discouraged.

"Oh, I should have known he wouldn't come the one time I wanted him," she told Shiloh.

And then stiffened. She was feeling a kind of cold that had nothing to do with weather fronts or warped sashes. Shiloh too was rising slowly from the place on the sofa where she liked to curl up and was pointing her sharp nose at the really profound, disturbing darkness that filled the end of the room and the hallway beyond like a cave.

Darkness visible, thought Mrs. Zahl distractedly, and then the blue flicker appeared and Charlie was, once again, pottering toward her on his inevitable round.

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Her heart was thudding dangerously and she would have given anything not to have to move, but in fact she stepped forward into his way and blocked him from his route to the wall behind the sectional desk. She felt a great horror at the idea that he might pass entirely through her, as ghosts were supposed to be able to do. She did not think she could stand it if that blue flicker touched her heart; she thought she would die on the spot. But in fact he came to a halt just in front of her, his rather shapeless face raised and turned a quarter to the left.

He had no eyes, and Mrs. Zahl, trying to look into what wasn't there, found herself staring through the holes at a corner of the divan and at Shiloh's trembling pale furry face. She could estimate where Charlie's eyes ought to be because the familiar pouchy iridescence lingered beneath them and the bald brow gleamed above — all in blue, of course, not the mottled red of alcoholic life.

She tried to speak once and failed. She tried again and this time her voice came out, so hoarse that she might have been incubating some horrible disease of the larynx.

"Charlie," she croaked. "Charlie."

The thing flickered, as if she had spoken into a candle flame and her breath had caused it to shiver and warp. Afraid that he might disappear, she lowered her voice and whispered urgently:

"They're your grandchildren as well as mine. Oh, I know I wasn't a very loving wife and I'm sorry, but I was always faithful. Sam is yours and his children are yours, too, Charlie, and we're losing them.

"Charlie, listen to me. I can't stop her but you can. She'll be driving over icy roads tomorrow about seven, driving like a bat out of hell, and she'll be tired. It'll be dark in the car. All you have to do is appear to her there, at the right time, maybe at the I-10 overpass. And Charlie, listen. Touch her. Put your — put your hand into her chest. Touch her heart. Put your fingers around it. Can you do that? Charlie!"

By way of answer he did a strange thing. He raised one pudgy flickering hand to touch her face and put his fingers through her cheek into her mouth. She felt in her teeth a strange little electric shock that was somehow horrifying. She felt his fingers drawn along her tongue and her face twisted as if she had bitten into a terribly sour fruit.

This was worse, much worse than she had imagined. Her heart

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paused, gave a bound, and began to pound so loudly that she could hear it. At the same time she felt an irresistible cold pressure. She stepped back, caught herself against the divan, and Charlie pottered past her and disappeared into the shadow by the desk.

Mrs. Zahl needed a *very* stiff drink after that experience. She had sensed some kind of malignant force in her dead husband that surely he had never possessed in life. Surely not? The overweight ex-jock, the hard-drinking clubman, the successful peddler of oil-field equipment? But then, since she had lost interest in him so early, how much had she ever really cared to know about him?

Shiloh was distracted, rushing about and trying to bark.

Eventually they found their way back upstairs to the bedroom, where Mrs. Zahl and her dog huddled under the covers until dawn and the empty glass stood on the bedside table, exhaling the smell of whiskey. And the dawn, as it will, however reluctantly, came at last.

TRUST HIM to get it wrong, she thought bitterly, watching the early news on WWL-TV. Trust Charlie. All he had had to do was appear to Marian at the right time and touch her. That was all. *Not* to the pilot, when he was trying to land his plane in an early morning soup of rain, fog and ice.

Sitting on the sofa, staring at the television set, her eyes sunken and dark, her robe clutched to her throat, she watched the red flashes cycling, the floodlights illuminating the downrush of sleety rain, the smouldering wreckage of what the announcer kept calling Flight 911.

A hundred and twenty-three people! Mrs. Zahl knew that if she lived for centuries, she would never, never be free of the guilt of causing this massacre. But who could have believed that Charlie, *Charlie*, would destroy a whole planeful of people? And *why* had he done it? Just clumsily, stupidly, as he had done so many things in life?

Or, she thought suddenly, was it simply a coincidence? Somehow that was more believable, and some of the weight pressing on her chest seemed to lift. After all, the plane might have crashed for a dozen different reasons while Charlie was innocently flitting through the terminal parking garage, looking for Marian's red Honda. Gradually Mrs. Zahl

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began to relax. Charlie getting lost seemed so much more in character than Charlie dealing death and destruction.

"It was just Fate, Shiloh. That's all."

Mrs. Zahl sat back on the sofa, trembling. The announcer went on about something else, she was never to remember what. Gambling on riverboats or some such nonsense. Of course the crash must have been the work of Fate, not of Charlie. Fate so often untied knots that seemed absolutely tight. You worried and stewed and cudgeled your brain and then the thing you feared just didn't happen, for some unimaginable reason.

Anyway, thought Mrs. Zahl, both she and Charlie had been saved from the guilt of killing someone. She retained enough religion to be glad of that, although — she added to herself firmly — they still shared the guilt of wanting Marian dead. Something else to be confessed, assuming that she ever went to confession again. But they had wanted to kill only Marian, not a crowd of innocent strangers, and they had not actually done the deed. It remained only a wish.

She reached out a still-trembling hand to turn on the light, for the morning was excessively dark and dreary as well as cold and wet and slippery outside. And then, for the third time in twenty-four hours, that other feeling came over her.

Oh, dear, she thought, the resident ghost again. Well, now at any rate she could ask Charlie straight out (even though he never spoke, so how could he tell her?) about what had actually happened at Moisant International Airport this dark morning the 25th of January.

She got unsteadily to her feet and turned. The blue flickering was brighter than ever before, and for good reason. Out of the darkness a crowd of ghosts began to trail across her floor, giving her looks that were either bewildered, fierce, or mournful according to their natures.

First came a fat woman holding a little girl by the hand, then a businessman who was clutching the transparent outline of his laptop computer as he shuffled by. Then a terribly young couple, still holding tight to each other and not even looking at Mrs. Zahl. A boy about twelve followed, snivelling into his sleeve; an elderly couple with a tremendous air of indignation about them; a black man shaking his head who paused to point an accusing finger at her; a pretty, pouty girl wearing the misty outline of a pale fur and a mini...

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Mrs. Zahl staggered and caught herself against the divan, her mouth moving silently like Shiloh's as she watched them pass. Then, with hands shaking like a victim of Parkinson's, she fetched a bottle from Charlie's memorial wetbar and mixed herself a drink. It seemed heartless, but she needed the liquor desperately. And then she stood and watched them pass, for the first of what she assumed would be many, many eternities.

She had misjudged Charlie entirely. He must be in Hell, and he had done this to damn her, too. How could he! After all, she had merely not loved him; how could he have hated her?

Still she did not despair. Silently she vowed to defeat him by a life of suffering and repentance. A hundred and twenty-three people had to file past and she forced herself, as the beginning of her penance, to look each and every one of them in the face. She was beginning to formulate a prayer acknowledging everything and asking forgiveness when Marian appeared.

Oh, she was unmistakable. Here she came, her bluish form distinctive with padded shoulders and long bob, like a refugee from the Andrews Sisters, with a dim gleam about the mouth as a memorial to her large horsey teeth. She was clenching her little fists in baffled rage, positively trembling with fury that all her plans had gone to pieces, that she would never be the wife of a CEO, that Sam would call off the move, that her children would be raised *by their grandmother!*

At the sight of her Mrs. Zahl lost every particle of her sense of guilt. While Shiloh gave a silent snarl, she raised her half-empty glass and smiled straight into what had been Marian's face. She said, smiling,"Cheers, darling."

She did not have a single moment to disavow that malignant joy when Marian stepped forward and thrust a small, cold, flickering hand into her chest and grasped her heart.

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His mailing address reads "Palo Alto, CA," but it's clear that Gary Shockley lives in a very strange world. Occasionally, that world intersects with our own, at which point a story often occurs (including previous publications in Damon Knight's The Clarion Awards *anthology and elsewhere). Currently, Mr. Shockley is assembling many of these intersections into a novel called* Tomki Chronicles *that covers a surreal time in which he rented a studio from the famous UFOlogist Dr. Jacques Vallee.*

You'll probably want some background music for this tale. A minute waltz, perhaps!

Dr. Borg

By Gary W. Shockley

I ALMOST STOP DIALING. I don't want to do this. I don't. But it's been eight days, and the strange symptoms persist.

"Ukiah Medical Center. May I help you?"

"Uh. Yeah. I'd like to make an appointment."

"Your doctor?"

"I don't currently have one."

"I see. Let me check here...."

I know what she's doing. She's looking for the newest member of the staff. I'm guinea pig material.

"May I ask who your insurance provider is?"

"I don't have health insurance," I say, feeling like a criminal and a victim at the same time.

"I see. Well...."

"Is that a problem?"

"Oh, no, no. No problem. Okay, I have a Dr. Borg who can see you tomorrow at nine-thirty."

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"Who?"

"Dr. Borg."

Despite my dark mood, I chuckle. "First name 'The'? Big *Star Trek* fan?"

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Nine-thirty tomorrow is fine. Thank you."

I get to the clinic twenty minutes early. I figure they'll hit me with one of those Alzheimer tests. You know, the form that asks for your complete medical history, all the shots you've ever had (Last Tetanus booster? Before the Saturn V, I jot), all the diseases (Hepatitis? Sure. TB? Uh-huh. Diphtheria? Of course. Ebola? You betcha), and I flunk royally, not a clue, can't even remember my home phone number.

A young woman hired for grunt work calls me into the back area, where she takes my weight (158), blood pressure (120/80), and temperature (98.6). Escorting me to a vacant room, she says, "Okayyy, wait here and Dr. — " She squints hard at her clipboard and gives a shudder. " — Borg will be right with you."

"Excuse me," I say before she can slip away. "Is this Dr. Borg new here?"

"Oh, couple of weeks. But she's — " She glances over her shoulder. " — gaining a reputation. You're...in good hands." With another shudder she steps out and closes the door.

A woman doctor. I knew it. I just knew it. My last two doctors were women, and both tried to kill me. There was the "Take these and call me in a week," from a Dr. Kinski based in Eugene, Oregon, giving me two bottles, one with an explicit warning on the back not to be used in conjunction with the other. Then there was the infamous rectal exam in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, wherein a Dr. Lamsky sought to set a new speed record for withdrawal. Hearing the thwup, I was engulfed in white light shot through with stars, attended by excruciating pain lasting minutes, through which, faintly, I heard her say, "Sorry."

Alone in the room, I try to allay my fears. Maybe she'll be ugly. I've been to college. I know how it works. All those pretty young things flocking about the professor, saying, "Oh please, please, please, I missed all the questions because my pencil broke!" and the professor, charmed by their attentions, agrees to look into the matter, opening the floodgates for

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countless beautiful inepts to move on, filling professional positions.

Just maybe, if this one's ugly, she'll be competent. Though fresh-flown-in with jet-lag and a hangover from med-school graduation late last night, maybe she'll do all right with her first-ever patient.

There's a light knock, then the door opens, and in steps a tall, busty, wasp-waisted woman who introduces herself as Dr. Borg while brushing back thick bangs from gorgeous hazel eyes and I know I'm going to die.

I rise, trembling, to shake her hand.

"How are we today?" she asks.

"Well, I seem to have a prob — "

"Uh!" She raises a finger. "No hints please. Let me figure it out."

She opens cabinets and drawers, pulling forth an astonishing array of instruments, and these she begins attaching to me, putting gizmos on herself as well, and it is the long monocular attachment that decides me.

"You're a *Star Trek* fan, aren't you," I say.

Her eyes — or eye, the one without the elongate monocle — brightens. "Oh, I love the show. *Original, Next Generation, Deep Space 9, Voyager,* doesn't matter. And you?"

I've trapped myself. Honesty prevails. "Actually, I can't stand the stuff. 'Forehead Theater,' I call it. I mean, the makeup's gotten better, but still — Aliens? They're costumed humans. And the plots? Can you say formula? And then there's *Babylon 5* and company pretending to be different, only they're not, they're not." I laugh pathetically, then pause, seeing her scowl and the hypodermic needle behind it. I swallow hard. "Just kidding. I love the stuff."

Well, she attaches still more devices to herself and to me, and while some of it is familiar, like the blood pressure gauge and the stethoscope and the ear thingy, there's a lot I just can't fathom. I'm standing and she's standing too, and we're only two feet apart enmeshed in tubes with my blood pumping through them and who knows, maybe hers; and I'm breathing into a transparent bag and so is she, maybe the same air, and it's like we've become this bizarre little biosphere that, that....

She steps closer, monocle almost touching me. "Now, Mr. Shockley," she says with a serious set to her jaw. "We must dance as we have never danced before."

I have to laugh. This is getting too weird. "Dance? Sorry. I don't."

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"If you don't dance, how am I to get an accurate metabolic — ?"

"I don't dance!" I say.

"Well, then," she hisses, grabbing my hand and shoulder, eye aglare just off the port brow. "Maybe it's time you learned!"

She leads, I follow. As we pass by the pulsemeter, she turns it all the way up. Our heartbeats pound through the room, sending framed credentials crashing to the floor.

We dance to the intersection of our pulses. At their sluggish start, we slow-dance. As they pick up, so, too, do we. Our pulses intertwine, slip apart, losing and refinding each other countless times in the creation of a microcosm of rhythms, all danceable, as we dare to prove.

"You're limping," she breathes.

"Well, I — "

"Don't! Don't tell me anything."

We dance onward. Some of the dances I recognize. Most are just a blunder of steps. I remember spinning her, and her me, though it seems impossible in our instrumented cocoon. All the while our hearts beat louder and faster still. Waltz, jitterbug, boogie, twist. Polka, fandango, disco, cachucha.

Ballet. Now that one is the worst.

"I think I'm dying," I gasp after a failed pirouette.

Her eyebrows arch. "Let *me* be the judge of that!"

Finally, mercifully, she turns the pulsemeter off and we glide to a halt. She looks at me with the slightest smile.

Then, to my great astonishment, she says, "Kinky," as if she can read my mind. Because this has been one very strange session. But a chimpanzee leaps down from the top of a cabinet and lopes over to her.

"You have a chimpanzee named Kinky?" I say.

She gives me a cold look while exhuming me from instrument hell. "I would caution you not to offend him. Besides, he's very smart." She tells the chimpanzee to bring her pamphlet number 1543, which he does. She hands it to me.

I read the cover. "Ankle Sprains: Healing after the injury and preventing reinjury."

"But — !"

"Sit down." When I hesitate, she pushes me into a chair. The

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chimpanzee pulls off my sandal and sock and starts sucking and chewing on my foot. At first it hurts, but then it starts feeling rather nice.

"You didn't think it was a sprain because there were no symptoms for eight hours," she says. "And you were puzzled by the swelling in the other foot as well, and — "

She proceeds to list all my symptoms, of which there are many, none mentioned to her, and for each she gives a credible explanation. She's good. Oh, she is very very good. And her monkey isn't bad either.

I'm home now, rapidly improving. I'm following the pamphlet to a T. And I'm thinking of watching some *Star Trek*. Maybe. Though I'd have to buy a TV. As for doctors — especially women ones — well, I still don't trust them. But they're not all bad. I found that out the morning I danced with Dr. Borg.

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K. D. Wentworth has sold stories to a variety of magazines, including Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Pulphouse, *and* Aboriginal SF. *Her fourth novel,* Black/on/Black, *just came out in February. Her last story to appear in these pages, "Tall One," is on the preliminary Nebula Awards ballot as we go to press.*

This new story takes us deep into the heart of an alien jungle on a lovely search for meaning and understanding.

The Embians

By K.D. Wentworth

AFTER SETTING THE AUDIO recorder for the night, Shayna wraps her fingers through the wires of the treetop blind and stares into the heavy darkness, straining to catch the next mating display the instant it flares. Just beyond the ragged edge of the rain forest, the unseen ocean hisses against the shore and salt hangs in the sultry air. Somewhere out in the sweltering sea of black, a small animal squalls and dies in the jaws of some nameless predator.

Flash of electric-green with orange diagonals. Melds into the yellow of fresh lemons. Softens...fades....

Darkness.

Cerulean blue. Swirls of carmine that suffuse with purple, brightening as though they will explode.

Darkness...darkness.

Shayna sighs. "They're so incredibly complex, so varied. If I could just sort the nuances into a key, I know I could make my thesis work."

Her expedition partner, Mae, dutifully records the mating displays on

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the night-cam in every wave-length from ultra-violet to infra-red for later analysis. She is eight years older than Shayna, working on her doctoral dissertation, rather than a mere master's thesis. Her movements are careful and methodical, everything always labeled, thought out, planned. Shayna understands herself to be more intuitive, knowing when an answer is ready, it will surface from the depths of her mind like an offering. Until then, she must wait, absorb data, allow her subconscious to analyze and correlate.

Mae shifts on the camp stool, so close in the narrow blind, Shayna can feel the heat of her skin, while out in the hot, tangled night of a world that has never known a moon, or tide, or the chill embrace of snow, the serpentlike embians slip through soft-fleshed trees and serenade each other with light. In the daylight, they appear vaguely humanoid, with similar number and placement of limbs, but their flesh is so dense, their bones are only cartilage, and they are as sinuous as eels. Their skin is a mottled gray-green and they rarely attain five feet in height. They produce no intelligible sounds.

"You might as well pick a different thesis and be done with it. Those displays are no more a language than wolves back on Earth howling at the moon. They're just mating lures." Mae jerks. "Over there!"

Acid-red. Sharpens to actinic violet that hurts the eyes. Flash...flash. White afterimage.

Darkness.

Shayna lifts sweat-soaked hair off her neck, impatient for the next display. "I think they're arguing. He's ready for her, has been for hours, but she's playing coy."

"How do you know it's mixed pair?" Mae asks, calmly sensible as always. "Other teams have documented male to male pairings, as well as female to female." From the first moment they met at the university funding this study, Mae reminded Shayna of a redwood that has stood for a thousand years and is no longer capable of surprise or wonder. "They're acting on instinct," Mae says. "When the time is right, they'll come together."

Come together. Such a pale expression for the incandescent union of embian or human. Shayna's fingers tighten until the blind's wires cut into her skin.

Impossible blue-black hovering on the edge of ultra-violet. Shot through with sparkles of green. Expands...expands. Flash of red.

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Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Shayna's pulse leaps, settles into the alien rhythm of the lights. She turns to Mae. "He's dying for her, and she's laughing, climbing just out of reach."

"Quit projecting." Mae's voice is curt, impatient. She leans away from the damp, sweaty touch of Shayna's thigh.

Muted green. Swirls of magenta.

Pale rose. Pool of lavender.

Darkness.

Compromise, thought Shayna. One relents, so the other bides his time. In the end, they will find a way to understand each other.

Olive.

Lime.

Darkness.

Red, Shayna thinks, fountains of orange-gold. White so hot it would burn you to ashes.

Glimmering pure green.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

The minutes pass, stretch into tens. Night hangs over the rain forest like a suffocating black shroud. After an hour, Mae exhales and clicks off the night-cam. "I think that's it for now. We might as well pack it in."

"Wait!" Shayna feels on the edge of understanding something vast and complex. She senses unseen colors lurking out there, waiting to be discovered, interpreted, felt. There are worlds within those colors, epiphanies too large for the conscious mind to enfold. Her hands knot together. "There might be a few more."

"Look, the only pair within range found each other." Mae's voice is exasperated. "What more do you want?"

What she wants, with a fierceness that frightens her, is something of her own, something not observed and written down in neat piles of notebooks, or catalogued on a computer screen, or stored as a visual record. She wants Mae's hand tracing the contours of her bare shoulder, craves Mae's perspiring body sleeked against her side in the loneliness of the night while outside the rain patters down and, inside, recycled air whirs. From the beginning, though, Mae has made it quite clear she does not waste her time on petty matters of the flesh with anyone, man or

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woman. Mae is all business, inviolate to everything but concerns of the mind, and her first rejection of Shayna's overtures was so painful, Shayna cannot bear to risk a second.

Her face hot, Shayna switches the lantern on, and then, by its pristine white glow, pulls up the trap door and climbs down to the dark tangle of the forest floor alone.

SHAYNA SLEEPS restlessly in the confines of her own bunk until noon, Aelta's noon, that is. The days are longer here, like the steamy, languid nights, and few creatures of any real mass stir under the blazing cauldron of the yellow-white sun. Inside the small research bungalow on the forest floor, though, the conditioned air is blissfully cool, allowing sleep or activity, whatever the hour.

Mae wakens even later and emerges from her room, rumpled and blinking. Her short ash-gold hair is plastered to her forehead. She is all muscles and planes, sense and organization. She stretches and smiles wanly. "We got some good footage last night."

Sitting at the metal kitchenette counter, Shayna nods over unsweetened coffee.

"I want to go to the cliffs and film the burrows again," Mae says. "My last tapes were too dark."

Shayna finds herself reluctant to return there, although it is safe to walk the jungle in the daylight. Embians are nocturnal and the local insect population disdains the alien taste of human skin and blood, but the sight of the sleepers curled into tight fetal balls, the light-generating organs on their chests pale and lifeless, disturbs her. When she looks at them so vulnerable, she feels guilty for spying on their love-making night after night.

"I have some transcriptions to make." Her hands tremble as she picks up her cup. "I'll meet you in the blind later."

The displays begin early, while the air still is suffused with light the shade of dark honey and the embians are barely visible.

Plum. Starburst of amber. Ochre.

Darkness.

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Watching the embians is the only time she feels real anymore. Shayna rakes her fingers back through sweat-sheened hair. If only they could install fans or air-conditioning in the blind, she would stay here all night, every night, but the embians have preternaturally sharp hearing. Conversation does not bother them, but the least mechanical sound drives them to perform their dazzling mating rituals elsewhere in the rain forest's steamy privacy. The night-cam and audio recorder, small as they are, have to be heavily shielded. Shielding the entire blind would be inordinately expensive, and the university that funded them subscribes to the long tradition that fieldwork should be difficult and uncomfortable.

She clicks on the sound recorder and sets it on the floor between her booted feet. The other camp stool remains empty. She envisions her partner with a broken leg, or perhaps a concussion, lying helpless and in pain among the trees' exposed, pulsating roots so that Shayna would be forced to trace her by the signal of her personal transponder. She sighs. Mae wouldn't be so distant, so self-sufficient then. The wire screen creaks as she leans back and wonders what it would be like if people spent half as much time learning about each other as they do trying to understand the embians.

Aquamarine.

Darkness.

A trill pierces the silence, full of loss and longing. What do they seek from each other, she wonders. A lifetime of commitment, or only a moment of ecstatic union? Do they raise their young together, or abandon them to survive on their own? Why do the males seek each other out at times, and then court females at others? So little is known of them except these dazzling displays of light.

Flash of peach. Intensifies to orange. Shot through with yellow lines that bleed into each other.

Darkness...darkness.

Mae pulls herself up the ladder, closes the trap door and drops, panting, onto her stool. "Sorry I'm late." She clicks off the lantern. She smells faintly of sweat, overlaid by a heavy floral soap, jasmine. "I was so filthy that I showered when I got back, but now I'm wringing wet again." She laughs ruefully.

Indigo. Mottled with gray. Fades....

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Darkness.

Shayna stares hard out into the liquid blackness, feeling the heat radiating from the woman at her side. Her own skin burns with its nearness. "I was getting worried."

"Look, I said I was sorry!" Mae's tone is stiff. She scrapes the camp stool toward the far corner.

Cinnamon. Saturated with blood-red.

Darkness.

Blue-violet. Brightens....

Darkness...Darkness.

"Never mind." Shayna remembers touching the damp curve of Mae's cheek, and how Mae recoiled that one, terrible time she dared that minor intimacy.

Red-violet.

Lilac.

Darkness.

Purple, strong and true, piercing the night like a beacon.

Darkness...darkness...darkness....

"I'd rather be here than anywhere else in the universe." Shayna stretches languidly. "It's like being on the edge of a wonderful secret, something no one else shares."

Mae exhales. "Your first assignment is usually like that, but then the newness wears off. And sometimes it can be just bloody miserable. On my last trip out, there was this asshole, William, who wouldn't take no for an answer. He was always after me, you know, rubbing up against me, touching me, and I hate to be pawed like that. It was so damn humiliating."

Shayna's gaze is drawn to a different quadrant of the rain forest as another display begins.

Sapphire.

Darkness.

She leans her head back, half-closes her eyes. "If — you were an embian, what color would you be?"

"Hmmm...." She can almost hear the slow smile spreading across Mae's face. "Silver, I think, like moonlight on the ocean. What about you?"

No moon rides these Stygian skies, one of the things Shayna misses

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most. Arms braced behind her head, she stares up at the ice-bright stars. "The hottest shade of vermilion I could find."

Jade.

Darkness.

"So, what do you think — two males, two females, or a mixed pair?" Mae asks. "I can check the infra-red tomorrow when I review the tape and see who's right."

Burst of cobalt. Explosion of red-violet. Fades....

Darkness.

Glimmering pool of pine-green. Expands. Shower of cadmium-orange.

Darkness.

"Two females," Shayna says.

Mae leans toward her, redolent with jasmine. "Why?"

"Because they're coming together so fast, no games at all, just inquiry and prompt resolution."

Aqua.

Sea-blue.

Darkness.

There is a momentary flash as Mae checks her watch to mark the time. "Okay, I'll let you know tomorrow."

Azure so intense the eye must look away.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Shayna tries to sleep, but colors flow like rivers behind her eyelids, unadulterated greens melting into raging, violent blues, oranges that erupt into an energetic sea of yellow-white. What is it the embians say out there in the darkness? What do they promise each other with each new pattern?

She tosses, presses her hands over hot dry eyes, tries to blank her mind, compose herself for the balm of sleep, but the colors intensify until she can taste them on the back of her tongue, hear them ringing in her ears. They *mean* something. She slips out of her bunk and sits on the edge, pushing her fingertips against her temples. *Red* throbs along her optic nerves, seeps deep into her brain. *Amber* melds with her unconscious. *Violet* sings.

Finally, she turns on the light and searches the stores. Somewhere in

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the station she has seen sets of colored bulbs for the lanterns, used as lures in the earliest studies when others besides herself had postulated the lighting displays possessed meaning. The embians never responded to static decoys, though, and, after dozens of unsuccessful trials, the bulbs had been abandoned in favor of the more traditional forms of observation.

Two hours before dawn, she finds a set of four: red, yellow, blue, and green, a severely truncated vocabulary, but perhaps enough to begin. She takes four extra lanterns and eases outside into the sticky, hot night air, leaving Mae soundly asleep. Sweat immediately trickles down her temples and pools between her breasts as she follows the well marked path to the blind, but then hikes beyond it into the virgin forest to hunch at the bottom of a great, fleshy tree oozing vinegar-scented sap.

The air has the consistency of heated sludge, down where the night breeze cannot reach. Her lungs labor to inhale, exhale. She kneels between protruding roots as knobby as knees, and, by the bland light of the white bulb, changes out the other four. She turns on the green and waits. Mating displays usually start just after dusk and intensify until midnight, tapering off after that, but a few embians roam until dawn, searching for something — she wishes she knew what.

The sodden heat of the night coils inside her, like a snake about to strike. She swings the lantern over her head, then turns it off, trying to approximate their initializing rhythm. *Green*, she thinks hard at the embians.

Whir of insects. Creak of trees shifting in the breeze. Rustle of mouse-small feet.

Ochre.

Darkness.

Her heart thumps. They never make the same response twice in a row. Her hands shake as she selects red this time, holds the lantern aloft for ten counted seconds before turning it off.

Darkness.

The night presses in as she tries to be patient. Out of sight, the ocean whispers against the sand. Her back itches and she tastes salt on her lips. She wishes for a moon, something, anything to lessen the unbroken power of the night.

Auburn. Streaked with ruby. Transmutes to shimmering jade.

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Darkness.

She selects yellow, then hesitates. What if she unknowingly says the wrong thing and drives it away? Reaching for calmness, she begins with yellow, adds the blue, then turns off the yellow and waits a few seconds before she extinguishes the blue.

Darkness...darkness...darkness.

Mint-green crowned with violet spangles. Brightens... brightens.

Darkness.

The display brings tears to her eyes; it's exquisite. She can never match its eloquence, never reply properly. She's so limited, so — primitive. She raises green and red together, holds them up until her muscles shake with fatigue poisons.

Darkness.

Something weaves through the trees now, close enough to hear the whisper of flesh against foliage. She massages her aching shoulder and huddles against the enormous root, staring into unrelieved obsidian.

Mulberry. Fades to rust. To silver. Fades....

Darkness.

It's so close now, no more than a hundred feet away, and she panics. This is the most important meeting of her life; she cannot bear to fail. She turns on all four, saying *redblueyellowgreen.*

Darkness...darkness....

The soft leaves rustle inches from her face. Something slim, blacker than the night itself, regards her through the darkness. It exhales the same subtle alien spice as the trees and the mud. *Amber. Pale green.* A female, taller and more slender than the males, with characteristic blue stripes on her throat.

Darkness.

Trembling, Shayna raises *yellow.*

Pale-daffodil.

Darkness.

This is obviously a conversation, if only she knew what they were saying to one another. She switches the yellow off. A dry hand caresses her face. Smooth as silk, more solid than human flesh, it slides along her cheek, trails across her lips, down her throat. Icy heat rushes through her. She is lost, drowned in *red-gold,* tasting cinnamon, musk, and something

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else, something alien and yet almost familiar. The night whirls and she is somewhere else, not here anymore, not in her body.

Metallic gold, brighter than the sun.

Gold, she thinks, yes, *gold!* She embraces it, folds herself about its icy-hot center, consumed by its richness, giving all she has until there is nothing left. *Gold,* yes, *gold.*

"Shayna!"

The sharp, worried word winds through the trees, penetrates the protective wall in her mind. She starts, finds herself curled about a cool firm shape, the way one spoon fits another. The embian female stirs within her embrace, gazes up at her with enigmatic ebony eyes. The deflated light-organ lies mute on her chest.

Shayna's heart races as she tries to remember. *Gold,* there had been *gold,* rich as melted butter, and then something more, she can't say what, only that it was immense and cold and fiery, all at the same time. She pulls the embian closer, thinking *gold.*

"Shayna, answer me! Are you hurt?" Mae's breathless voice is closer now as she crashes through the brush.

The embian frees herself gently from Shayna's hands, then slips away, gray-green hide blending instantaneously with the trackless riot of tree and bush. Shayna folds empty arms over her breasts and rocks there on her knees, suddenly, terribly alone.

"My God!" Mae fights her way through a hanging vine and then stops, looming over her. "Are you all right?"

The muted sunlight, filtered through layer upon layer of vegetation, catches her fair hair and transmutes it to spun gold. Shayna squints up at her. *Gold,* she thinks and reaches up to touch the gleaming strands. Mae backs out of reach, her face both angry and afraid.

Shayna drops her empty hand.

"What were you doing out there in the bush? It took me two hours to find you, even with the transponder, once I realized you weren't down at the cliffs." Mae's voice vibrates with anger. "Pull yourself together, dammit." She fits Shayna's trembling hands around a mug of coffee. "We have four weeks left on this grant and I have no intention of leaving early."

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Shayna stares into the cup. Deep brown, swirled with lighter streaks of creamer. What does it mean?

"Drink that, then take a hot shower." Mae paces the kitchenette. "I'll manage both the audio and the visual recordings myself for a few nights while you get some extra rest."

She tastes the steaming coffee, but it's only hot, not icy at all. It should be both.

"It's getting dark." Mae pours herself a cup of coffee, then blows on it. "I have to get out to the blind. Are you going to be okay?"

The table is unpainted aluminum, burnished to a high sheen. Shayna spreads her fingers across it, studies the puzzling contrast of pink flesh on gray metal.

"I have to go!"

"Yes," Shayna manages, her eyes still on her hand. "I'll — be fine. Don't — don't worry."

Mae shoulders the night-cam, but Shayna doesn't look up. Words are shallow, like water poured across pavement, one molecule deep and ten yards wide. Because words can mean almost anything, depending on context and inflection, she realizes now that in reality they mean nothing.

Once the outer door closes, she waits a few minutes, then collects the four lanterns with colored bulbs. She studies each in turn, touching them with wondering fingertips, *red, blue, green, yellow.* Grateful for their purity, she pulls the transponder bracelet off her wrist and leaves it on the table.

Outside, it is raining and a thousand scents vie, wet mud, astringent sap, rotting leaves, a dank musky fungus that has eaten into the nearest flesh-tree beside their bungalow. After only a few steps she abandons the trail and battles her way into the dripping darkness, using momentary flashes of the white bulb as her guide. It will not be the same tonight, somehow she is sure of that. What embians have to say is a symphony, rather than a droning one-note song. It would take a hundred lifetimes to perform all the parts.

Her rain-soaked shirt catches on the branches and she tears it loose. Finally, she stumbles across a hollow with a crooked stream at its heart which feels right somehow. She stops, lights a color at random. It gleams *blue,* strong and true. She counts the seconds, then turns it off.

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Darkness... darkness...darkness....

Sky-blue slashed with pink. Softens. Starburst of burgundy.

Darkness.

The display was so far away, she could barely distinguish the pink qualifiers. She lights *green* and *yellow*, swinging them overhead, one in each hand.

Darkness.

Off to her left, between the original display and herself, another answers. *Chartreuse. Flash of blue-white. Black afterimage.*

Darkness.

Two responses, herself and another. How do they choose in such a situation? Do they go to the closest, or pick the more interesting of the two conversations? She hugs her knees, waiting.

Closer. *Opalescent white. Tarnishes to pewter. Fades.*

Darkness. Her hands shake as she rushes to answer before the other can, crying out *red!*

Even closer, almost at the same second. *Mauve banded with copper.*

Darkness.

Closer still. *Ivory. Dissolves into rose.*

Darkness...darkness...darkness....

It's obvious she cannot compete with the second embian's stylish complexity, but the dark silence drags on and so she finally raises *yellow* and *red* together.

Pale gray. So near she can make out the black outline of the torso behind it.

Darkness.

Alabaster the second answers and she hears the swish of bare feet through mud.

Darkness.

So pale tonight, she thinks, and then selects *white* without much hope. They complement each other, while she is alien, less than nothing to them, babbling like an infant without understanding.

A squat embian emerges from the wet leaves, a red-banded male, his eyes black holes in his head. His muscles swell in sleek bands beneath his skin. His hands are short and powerful. They regard each other by the light of the lantern.

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Marble-white.

Cream. A second male, more slender, his neck-bands only a faint scattering of red, slips up from her right, more hesitant, less sure of himself. He coils around the flesh-tree, his movements graceful as an anaconda. Rain patters down from above in a sudden flurry.

They have come for each other, she thinks, not for her, and extinguishes the white bulb. She picks up the other four, slides her hand over the wet shapes of the trees behind her in order to back away and leave them to make what they can of this night.

Two pairs of smooth hands touch her face, her neck, her arms, her breasts. Lean, hard bodies press against her, one on each side. She is drowned in a sudden burst of *white,* brighter than ermine, more pure than ivory or marble, sweeter than alabaster, *white* which burns down into the secret part of her that is self, sings along every nerve, fire and ice blended into one glorious rush that leaves her unable to breathe.

White is the center of the universe, she thinks, a bridge of light into a realm she's never dreamed existed. *White,* all along and forever without knowing she has been *white.*

SHE WAKES to the tangible presence of darkness, which inhabits the forest like a prowling black beast. The sultry breeze is its breath, stirring the leaves over her head, whispering. The muddy hollow where she has lain with the embians still bears the shape of their bodies, but they have slipped away.

White sizzles behind her eyes, on the threshold of meaning. She sags back against the unseen vegetation, warm rain dripping down her forehead, and traces the hurricane of colors in her mind...*coral...flashes of amethyst...long winding streamers of sapphire* that twine through her thoughts, giving her glimpses of an inaccessible country deep within, occasionally felt but never known, always heretofore a dark and secret place.

Embian minds are not organized as a human's; they have communicated that much to her now. They think, but not in human ways, not in cause-and-effect strings, stimulus and response, logical progressions, but in great rivers of sensation and memory and association that combine in

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unexpected, synergistic ways and cannot be learned in coherent segments, only experienced.

She brushes the worst of the mud off and heads for the bungalow by the light of the white lantern. Without a path, she wanders for a time, her soaked clothes clinging to her thighs and shoulders, lost in the maze of towering flesh-trees, until she changes lanterns for some reason she cannot name. The *blue* bulb reaches back into her mind, remembers the feel of the bungalow, the exact amount of pull it exerts, how it lessens when she turns away from it, increases when she turns back. She half-closes her eyes and feels the way, not stopping to think or analyze, just following the blind sense of *home.*

Mae is waiting, fuming, blonde hair plastered to her skull by the rain. She clenches the discarded transponder in her fist. Mud coats her bare legs up to the knees.

Shayna stands in the open door with the blue lantern in her hand, the remaining four cradled like children against her breasts.

The other woman wilts into the nearest chair. "I've made allowances for your age and lack of experience up until now, but I won't put up with this irresponsible behavior anymore." Her voice is choked.

Shayna sets the lanterns aside in the corner, well out of harm's way. Each one is precious beyond measure.

"Why are you wandering that hellacious forest alone—at *night,* by God? Do you really want to die?" Mae runs spread fingers back through her wet hair.

"I'm only beginning to understand." Shayna perches on the arm of Mae's chair. "But it is a language, just like I thought."

"This is serious, goddammit!" Mae jerks to her feet. "What could those animals possibly have to say out there in the bloody darkness that's worth risking your life?" Her blue eyes brim, bright with unshed tears.

Shayna wants to tell her about the wonders she's experienced, *gold* which melts your heart and makes the sun sing, *white* bridging the way to Heaven itself, but there are no words for such things between humans. "What about your dissertation?" She grasps Mae's hand. She feels *brown,* with a touch of *violet.* Yes. She tightens her fingers and works to phrase this in *brown* so she will understand. "Solving this puzzle could make your career."

Mae stares at her trapped hand as anger and curiosity vie in her eyes,

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feeding upon each other. "All right," she says finally. "I'll give you one chance to convince me, but you have to promise that you'll give up this asinine wandering by yourself after tonight, if I don't agree."

Shayna nods, then gives the white lantern to Mae, carrying the other four herself. The minute they step outside, *aqua* brims behind her eyes, brightened with sparkles of *lime*. Interesting, if she only knew what it meant, but it is too soon. She's still growing, changing, learning.

At first Mae leads, but then she stops beneath the blind at the end of the path. "How — much farther?" she asks hesitantly.

The dark presses in, warm and thick, scented with sap. Shayna feels in *auburn* squiggles how close Mae is to bolting. "This is far enough." She extinguishes the white lantern, then fumbles in the darkness to select another at random. It shines out *red* and she is content. *Red* hints at deep considerations boiling just below the surface, an admirable opening.

Darkness.

After waiting ten minutes for a response, she tries again. *Yellow.*

Darkness.

"This is stupid." Mae hunches over her ribs, closed and disbelieving, as always. "They never answer static lures.

Far out in the forest, almost hidden. *Violet. Flare of indigo, so deep, it's almost black. Fades.*

Darkness.

"Now what?" Mae asks. Shayna displays *red* and *yellow.*

Darkness.

Periwinkle, banded with blue. Bursts of white.

Darkness.

"Christ, that was a lot closer!" Mae rises. "That's enough."

"No," she says. "You need proof." Periwinkle... Shayna reaches down into that part of her that knows without logic, understands without reasons, and feels for an answer. Without conscious thought, her hand selects *white* and *red.*

Darkness.

"I said I've had enough!" Mae wrenches at her arm.

Dusty rose brightening to salmon.

Darkness.

"That one was almost on top of us!" Mae's voice rises. "Stop it!"

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White, Shayna answers.

Darkness.

"All right, stay here! Let it tear your head off when it finds out you can't satisfy its needs, or maybe it will screw you anyway. Have you even considered that?"

Umber. Shot through with pale yellow.

Darkness.

She feels the embian's approach like a bath of *red-violet*. "If you leave," she says evenly, "you'll never understand." She displays *whiteyellowred*. A massive shape, much larger than any embian she has ever seen, is silhouetted black against a patch of stars through a gap in the trees. *Topaz*.

His skin is cool silk. *Topaz* swells like a nova, enveloping them in the now familiar ice-fire and beyond that, showing them an opening of some sort, egress from the stultifying boundary of conscious self...emergence, freedom. Mae cries out wordlessly as searing *topaz* binds them to each other and the male and the rain forest and the ocean and the wind, alters the pathways in their brains so they will never be alone again, never apart, always and forever touching. *Topaz*.

Shayna awakes curled against the male's chest. Mae's ragged breathing rasps in her ear. The pale-gray dawn filters down through the trees, illuminating Mae's pallid, unconscious face. The male blinks at her. Shayna sees *azure* behind his black eyes, *mauve* in the set of his head. Moving delicately, he eases away and disappears into the trees.

Mae groans, drags a hand across her forehead. She seems *olive* to Shayna, mixed with a bit of *plum*. She touches her face.

The other woman bolts up and her eyes are terrified. She crosses her arms over her breasts, struggles for breath. "Where — wh — " She is trembling so hard that she cannot make the sounds.

Shayna cradles Mae's head. "Gone," she says, "but there will be others, and their gifts will be just as wonderful."

"No," Mae forces between chattering teeth. "It's l-like — being shattered, then jammed b-back together with the pieces all in the w-wrong places."

She helps Mae back to the cool, dry air of the bungalow, bathes her, then

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puts her to bed with a cup of hot broth. Mae shakes so badly that she has to be fed, spoonful by spoonful. Her trembling lessens until finally her eyelids sag, but minutes later she wakes, crying out, tears streaming down her cheeks. "*Orange!*" She buries her face in her hands. "Please, God, not *orange!*"

Shayna sits on the bed and cradles her again, her skin tingling where Mae's lean body touches her. *Orange* is not so bad, she thinks. *Orange* explodes warm on the tongue, cools the back of the throat, fire and ice, like all other colors, an invitation to abandon restrictions of flesh and soar in other dimensions of the soul.

"Shhh," she whispers. "Think of *cinnamon* instead." She pictures cinnamon, heavy and quiet, full of backwaters and still ponds, like late afternoon on a sweltering summer day.

Mae's body heaves with her efforts to stop sobbing. Her face presses against Shayna's shoulder. Shayna feels *cinnamon* seeping into her thoughts, tingeing the river of her grief. They have both lost something in the process of growing, like shedding an outgrown skin, and this is harder on Mae because her thoughts have always been so rigid, locked into logic and order. Letting go of such crutches must be as painful as being born. When the ship returns in four weeks, she and Mae will take home the knowledge they have gained here, and perhaps teach a few selected others the colors of the soul as they are meant to be experienced, not at a distance through the rarified isolation of the conscious self, but through immersion in those secret places shrouded in darkness until now, that part of the mind where the embians have always lived. She leans against Mae and the other woman gradually quiets. When they had known only their surface selves, they were too different, she, with her fear of rejection, and Mae's avoidance of intimacy. But now they have been set free to find that place deep inside where what they wanted from each other and from life was always the same, where it is possible for them to be together.

Shayna nestles close, fitting against Mae's side perfectly, just as she had always known she would. They are one flesh now, one mind. *Emerald,* she thinks, feeling the surge of greenness under her skin, behind her heart, beneath her fingernails, acceptance of otherness, settling into place.

Mae exhales and rests her flushed cheek against Shayna's neck. Her slim fingers twine through Shayna's. "*Emerald,*" she agrees in a sleep-fogged voice and closes her eyes.

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Larry Tritten lives in San Francisco. He has graciously offered to solve a number of the most vexing mysteries of our time. That number is four. Here are the solutions — don't try cheating by looking ahead to the back of the magazine. You'll only get confused.

History's Mysteries

By Larry Tritten

THE FOLLOWING EXCERPTS are from Dr. Anatol Numbly's book, *History's Mysteries*, which will go to press just as soon as his proofreader can get the tire marks off the manuscript. Numbly, who describes himself as an esotericist and world traveler, is the author of two previous books, *Trick or Trout: A History of Halloween in Alaska* and *What the Sphinx Thinx* (inspired by an article he wrote titled *Psychic Speculations: Reflections on Possible Thoughts of Rodin's Thinker).*

The Abominable Snowman

So much has been written about the Abominable Snowman, or *yeti* as he is called by the inhabitants of his natural habitat (*yeti* is a Tibetan word meaning "high pockets") that it is all but impossible to sift the fact from the fiction.

Firsthand accounts, articles, essays, novels, plays, television series, entertainment and documentary films, and comic strips have all contributed to belief in the existence of an eight- to twelve-foot-tall being that

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looks like a mutated Sylvester Stallone and amuses itself by wrapping mountain climbers in their tents and rolling them off precipices.

For some reason, the legend of the *yeti* strikes a particularly responsive chord in the public's imagination. In 1952, shortly after the first photographs of a *yeti* were published in American newspapers, the creature became so popular that every Halloween party had its throng of *yetis,* which were outnumbered only by Eisenhowers. A poll taken by George Gallup's aunt (and later found in Gallup's bread box behind the zwieback) even revealed that two out of three voters preferred a *yeti* to either of the candidates for the presidency.

How much credence, then, should one give to the story of the Abominable Snowman? Consider the original account by the discoverer of the *yeti,* the English explorer Howard Burrow, and make up your own mind:

"We had been climbing for several days. The expedition was now in chaos. I had lost my pitons, crampons, snow glasses, snap rings, climbing rope, hammer, ice ax, compass, gun, and one sock, was out of breath, and had stumbled into a colossal drift where I subsided to the brows and wearily languished, warming myself with thoughts of summer games of croquet in Darjeeling.

"I was alone. Basil had sneezed at an inopportune moment and now lay akimbo on an ice shelf 2,000 feet below. Giles had wandered off in search of a crevasse where some pocket change was said to have been lost. And our Sherpa guide, Yaws, had returned to our base camp allegedly to fetch a bigger pair of earmuffs. At that point, left alone in the elemental fury of a gathering storm, huddled against an outcropping of rock and thinking wistfully about the bouillabaisse at the Royal Gardens, I perceived in the hazy distance a figure that could easily have been that of the largest Rugby player ever to cross the field at Cardiff. I sensed immediately that this was no human being, but rather a creature of some preternatural species to whom even the most basic form of human communication, such as money lending, would have utterly no meaning.

"Of the events that followed I have no clear perception, and I regained consciousness six hours later inside a mammoth snowball at the foot of the slope, with a dislocated rib cage and a facial tic that didn't end until I saw my first Marilyn Monroe calendar eight months later."

Is it true that a race of primordial giants who have no need of tailors

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live in the remote reaches of the Himalayas? There are countless photographs that seem to substantiate the story, the least convincing of which are stamped "Property of the Fox Network" on the back.

Finally, we are obliged to admit that at the moment there is just not enough evidence available, either pro or con, to justify any definitive statement about the existence of the Abominable Snowman. It may be that someday one of these creatures will descend from the stark wastes of the Himalayas to look for an agent or to negotiate an exclusive contract and advance with Doubleday & Co., Inc. But until that day, the legend of the *yeti*, like the appeal of *sushi*, will continue to rank as one of the world's great unsolved mysteries.

The Easter Island Faces

Easter Island is located 3,450 miles south of Christmas Island in the South Pacific Ocean. Coincidence or design?

Consider further. Christmas Island is located 5,430 miles east of the precise spot where Father's Day Island was before it sank into the sea during the cataclysmic eruption of Krakatoa in August 1883. Again, coincidence or design?

In any case, to this day the great stone faces of Easter Island stare impassively seaward, their graven visages serving as mute testimony to a past about which we can only surmise. The customary assumption of the layman is that the Easter Island statues were created by the island's ancient inhabitants. Ecology, however, suggests that this is flatly impossible since the tiny, barren island could never have provided food and clothing for more than 314 people, and it would have taken at least 4,107 stonemasons working day and night (without coffee breaks) more than 200 years to complete the faces. Even conceding the existence at one time of up to 75 restaurants with take-out service on Sala y Gomez, the nearest island to Easter Island, it would have been an astounding feat.

Who, then, was responsible for the Easter Island statues? Who, indeed, would want to erect hundreds of gigantic, dour stone countenances when the vast amount of energy consumed by the task could have been used much more enjoyably trying to teach monkeys to heel or attempting to create and implement the system of credit buying?

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Extraterrestrials? This is one possible answer, which is popular among the kind of people who vacation in Roswell, New Mexico, instead of the Caribbean. It goes without saying that the Easter Island faces would be considerably easier to explain if they were located on the outskirts of Disneyland, but the fact is they are not. And whoever built them left no other trace of their own presence behind. Their identity is purely a matter of conjecture. Not one of the faces is smiling, which could conceivably be evidence that the builders were from a high rent district. Nor do any of them sport beards or mustaches, so it can safely be said that they are the product of a people who held barbers in high esteem. An altogether maverick opinion is espoused by Dr. Wolfgang Yale, author of the best-selling self-actualization Western novel, *Gunfight at the I'm OK, You're OK Corral,* who wrote (in a letter to his mother), "As one whose role model is the 1970's happy face, frankly I don't care who carved the damned things."

The final word on Easter Island belongs deservedly to the late Thor Heyerdahl, the famous Norwegian archeologist, author, and freelance castaway, who once spent eleven days and nights standing and staring at one of the great stone faces without blinking, gesticulating, or yawning. Heyerdahl wrote in his book *Aku-Aku-Gesundheit!,* "So many of these faces remind me of Peter Lorre. I am reluctant to draw a conclusion."

The Pyramids

The Pyramids have been with us for more than 2,000 years, and we have yet to discover their definitive origin. The traditional hypothesis that they were built by slave labor has recently been discredited by the discovery that 2,000 years ago slaves were so poorly fed (on snake tips and sump greens) that they barely had the strength to pick the lint off their clothing and skip flat stones across the Nile.

What, then, was the origin of the Pyramids? If they are not (as Aramis Kneen has contended in his book *The Limp Fez)* props left over from the largest theatrical production in Egyptian history, where did they come from? And how did they get there? Teleportation? Telekinesis? Pulleys? U-Haul? And what of the many odd phenomena associated with the Pyramids, e.g., (1) it is impossible to sneeze inside of a Pyramid while

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wrapped in muslin; (2) a compass will not operate properly within 400 yards of the base stone of a Pyramid — unless it is being held by someone who bought a souvenir at one of the King Tut exhibits; and (3) photographs taken of the Pyramids often have ghostly superimposed images of Gamal Abdel Nasser gargling.

It has always been taken more or less for granted that the Pyramids were intended by their builders as funerary edifices, but this explanation is no longer adequate, especially for those who have trouble with more than two syllables. True, the remains of Egyptian pharaohs frequently have been uncovered in pyramids. And, true, on the walls of some Pyramids there are hieroglyphics that bear a certain resemblance to epitaphs (e.g., "Here entombed lies Abu Zhig — Tasted an assassin's fig"). Yet there is something curiously suspect and stagy about this evidence, as is attested by Dr. Aldric Mumford, the eminent Egyptologist, who was dismissed from his post at the South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts for publishing a paper contending that the Pyramids are in fact "markers" left on the surface of the earth in ancient times by visiting location scouts from other planets.

According to Dr. Mumford, other markers in this pattern are the Stonehenge monoliths, the stone temple at Copan in Honduras, the Rock of Gibraltar, Mt. Rushmore, Charlton Heston, and the town of Butte, Montana. Such an intellectually bold theory requires further explication, and I would welcome the task if it were not for the fact that Dr. Mumford, for reasons that would defy the understanding of the layman, has chosen to publish his thesis in Pig Latin. Possibly one day a translation will be available. In the meantime, those who have a consuming interest in the Pyramids are advised to spend more time thinking about the Sphinx.

The Bermuda Triangle

In the South Atlantic Ocean there is a roughly triangular-shaped area known popularly as the Bermuda Triangle (with one point of the triangle located off the Miami coast, the second off Bermuda, and the third off Puerto Rico), in which things and people disappear. On December 5, 1945, five U.S. Navy torpedo bombers and a Navy PBM flying boat vanished in the Bermuda Triangle, never to be seen again. In January 1947, a commer-

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cial fishing boat vanished (although the fact that its captain owed money to sixteen creditors perhaps lessens the mystery somewhat). This list of similar occurrences is long and impressive; in all, during the past 42 years, 978 people, 134 house pets (not counting goldfish), and 11 department store mannequins have dropped out of sight in the Bermuda Triangle. It's hardly surprising that James Cameron responded to a studio executive's suggestion that *Titanic* be filmed in the area by seeing to it that the executive disappeared from the studio's payroll.

In a discussion of the Bermuda Triangle, the first question that springs up is, is wet geometry really reliable? Expostulations usually follow, which lead to chain smoking, then between six and ten Cuba Libres, and, finally, sleep or insomnia, or an attempt to change the subject.

Instances of inexplicable disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle were first recorded in the 1930s when it was noticed that some passengers on transatlantic vessels reached their ports with receding hairlines and others tended to lose their accents. In the mid-'30s, there was an epidemic of missing pairs of Bermuda shorts among British Navy officers. Stories of the disappearance of such items as pens, combs, keys, cufflinks, matchbooks, jokers from decks of playing cards, and white mice were commonplace. An American schoolteacher, it is said, returned from a cruise through the Bermuda Triangle with no memory of what her middle initial stood for and an odd tendency to correct papers using invisible ink, and within the same year all of the sweatbands disappeared from hats of a group of haberdashers bound for a convention in Liverpool.

Such stories proliferated. In 1937 seven amateur magicians chartered a boat and sailed into the Triangle and were never seen again, although there is some evidence that at least four of them made long distance calls to relatives later in the year from Puerto Rico. By the mid-'40s the notoriety of the Triangle was firmly established.

The Bermuda Triangle remains to this day a puzzle of ineffable magnitude. There have been many other instances of unaccountable disappearances in human history, but none ha

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We're pleased to welcome Stephen Baxter to the pages of F&SF *with this story. Mr. Baxter has been one of the most prolific new writers in the sf field since he sold his first story to the British magazine* Interzone *in 1987. He has published more than eight novels since 1991, including* Titan, Voyage *and* The Time Ships *(a sequel to Wells's* The Time Machine*), which won two or three awards. His most recent book is a collection,* Vacuum Diagrams, *and upcoming projects include new novels* Moonseed *and* Mammoth, *and a collaboration with Arthur C. Clarke.*

Like many of Mr. Baxter's stories, "Huddle" vividly portrays a world unlike our own.

Huddle

By Stephen Baxter

HIS BIRTH WAS VIOLENT. He was expelled from warm red-dark into black and white and cold, a cold that dug into his flesh immediately.

He hit a hard white surface and rolled onto his back.

He tried to lift his head. He found himself inside a little fat body, gray fur soaked in a ruddy liquid that was already freezing.

Above him there was a deep violet-blue speckled with points of light, and two gray discs. *Moons.* The word came from nowhere, into his head. Moons, two of them.

There were people with him, on this surface. Shapeless mounds of fat and fur that towered over him. Mother. One of them was his mother. She was speaking to him, gentle wordless murmurs.

He opened his mouth, found it clogged. He spat. Air rushed into his lungs, cold, piercing.

Tenderly his mother licked mucus off his face.

But now the great wind howled across the ice, unimpeded. It grew dark. A flurry of snow fell across him.

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His mother grabbed him and tucked him into a fold of skin under her belly. He crawled onto her broad feet, to get off the ice. There was bare skin here, thick with blood vessels, and he snuggled against its heat gratefully. And there was a nipple, from which he could suckle.

He could feel the press of other people around his mother, adding their warmth.

He slept, woke, fed, slept again, barely disturbed by his mother's shuffling movements.

The sharp urgency of the cold dissipated, and time dissolved.

He could hear his mother's voice, booming through her big belly. She spoke to him, murmuring; and, gradually, he learned to reply, his own small voice piping against the vast warmth of her stomach. She told him her name — *No-Sun* — and she told him about the world: people and ice and rock and food. "*Three winters:* one to grow, one to birth, one to die..." Birth, sex and death. The world, it seemed, was a simple place.

The cold and wind went on, unrelenting. Perhaps it would go on forever.

She told him stories, about human beings.

"...We survived the Collision," she said. "We are surviving now. Our purpose is to help others. We will never die..." Over and over.

To help others. It was good to have a purpose, he thought. It lifted him out of the dull ache of the cold, that reached him even here.

He slept as much as he could.

No-Sun pulled her broad feet out from under him, dumping him onto the hard ice. It was like a second birth. The ice was dazzling white, blinding him. *Spring.*

The sun was low to his right, its light hard and flat, and the sky was a deep blue-black over a landscape of rock and scattered scraps of ice. On the other horizon, he saw, the land tilted up to a range of mountains, tall, blood-red in the light of the sun. The mountains were to the west of here, the way the sun would set; to the east lay that barren plain; it was morning, here on the ice.

East. West. Morning. Spring. The words popped into his head, unbidden.

There was an austere beauty about the world. But nothing moved in it, save human beings.

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He looked up at his mother. No-Sun was a skinny wreck; her fur hung loose from her bones. She had spent herself in feeding him through the winter, he realized.

He tried to stand. He slithered over the ice, flapping ineffectually at its hard surface, while his mother poked and prodded him.

There was a sound of scraping.

The people had dispersed across the ice. One by one they were starting to scratch at the ice with their long teeth. The adults were gaunt pillars, wasted by the winter. There were other children, little fat balls of fur like himself.

He saw other forms on the ice: long, low, snow heaped up against them, lying still. Here and there fur showed, in pathetic tufts.

"What are they?"

His mother glanced apathetically. "Not everybody makes it."

"I don't like it here."

She laughed, hollowly, and gnawed at the ice. "Help me."

After an unmeasured time they broke through the ice, to a dark liquid beneath. *Water.*

When the hole was big enough, No-Sun kicked him into it.

He found himself plunged into dark fluid. He tried to breathe, and got a mouthful of chill water. He panicked, helpless, scrabbling. Dark shapes moved around him.

A strong arm wrapped around him, lifted his head into the air. He gasped gratefully.

He was bobbing, with his mother, in one of the holes in the ice. There were other humans here, their furry heads poking out of the water, nostrils flaring as they gulped in air. They nibbled steadily at the edges of the ice.

"Here's how you eat," No-Sun said. She ducked under the surface, pulling him down, and she started to graze at the underside of the ice, scraping at it with her long incisors. When she had a mouthful, she mushed it around to melt the ice, then squirted the water out through her big, overlapping molars and premolars, and munched the remnants.

He tried to copy her, but his gums were soft, his teeth tiny and ineffective.

"Your teeth will grow," his mother said. "There's algae growing in the ice. See the red stuff?"

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He saw it, like traces of blood in the ice. Dim understandings stirred.

"Look after your teeth."

"What?"

"Look at him."

A fat old man sat on the ice, alone, doleful.

"What's wrong with him?"

"His teeth wore out." She grinned at him, showing incisors and big canines.

He stared at the old man.

The long struggle of living had begun.

LATER, THE LIGHT started to fade from the sky: purple, black, stars. Above the western mountains there was a curtain of light, red and violet, ghostly, shimmering, semi-transparent.

He gasped in wonder. "It's beautiful."

She grinned. "The night dawn."

But her voice was uneven; she was being pulled under the water by a heavy gray-pelted body. A snout protruded from the water and bit her neck, drawing blood. "Ow," she said. "Bull — "

He was offended. "Is that my father?"

"The Bull is everybody's father."

"Wait," he said. "What's my name?"

She thought for a moment. Then she pointed up, at the sky burning above the mountains like a rocky dream. "Night-Dawn," she said.

And, in a swirl of bubbles, she slid into the water, laughing.

Night-Dawn fed almost all the time. So did everybody else, to prepare for the winter, which was never far from anyone's thoughts.

The adults cooperated dully, bickering.

Sometimes one or other of the men fought with the Bull. The contender was supposed to put up a fight for a while — collect scars, maybe even inflict a few himself — before backing off and letting the Bull win.

The children, Night-Dawn among them, fed and played and staged mock fights in imitation of the Bull. Night-Dawn spent most of his time in the water, feeding on the thin beds of algae, the krill and fish.

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He became friendly with a girl called Frazil. In the water she was sleek and graceful.

Night-Dawn learned to dive.

As the water thickened around him he could feel his chest collapse against his spine, the thump of his heart slow, his muscles grow more sluggish as his body conserved its air. He learned to enjoy the pulse of the long muscles in his legs and back, the warm satisfaction of cramming his jaw with tasty krill. It was dark under the ice, even at the height of summer, and the calls of the humans echoed from the dim white roof.

He dived deep, reaching as far as the bottom of the water, a hard invisible floor. Vegetation clung here, and there were a few fat, reluctant fishes. And the bones of children.

Some of the children did not grow well. When they died, their parents delivered their misshapen little bodies to the water, crying and cursing the sunlight.

His mother told him about the Collision.

Something had come barreling out of the sky, and the Moon — one or other of them — had leapt out of the belly of the Earth. The water, the air itself was ripped from the world. Giant waves reared in the very rock, throwing the people high, crushing them or burning them or drowning them.

But they — the people of the ice — survived all this in a deep hole in the ground, No-Sun said. They had been given a privileged shelter, and a mission: to help others, less fortunate, after the calamity.

They had spilled out of their hole in the ground, ready to help.

Most had frozen to death, immediately.

They had food, from their hole, but it did not last long; they had tools to help them survive, but they broke and wore out and shattered. People were forced to dig with their teeth in the ice, as Night-Dawn did now.

Their problems did not end with hunger and cold. The thinness of the air made the sun into a new enemy.

Many babies were born changed. Most died. But some survived, better suited to the cold. Hearts accelerated, life shortened. People changed, molded like slush in the warm palm of the sun.

Night-Dawn was intrigued by the story. But that was all it was: a story, irrelevant to Night-Dawn's world, which was a plain of rock, a

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frozen pond of ice, people scraping for sparse mouthfuls of food. *How, why, when:* the time for such questions, on the blasted face of Earth, had passed.

And yet they troubled Night-Dark, as he huddled with the others, half-asleep.

One day — in the water, with the soft back fur of Frazil pressed against his chest — he felt something stir beneath his belly. He wriggled experimentally, rubbing the bump against the girl.

She moved away, muttering. But she looked back at him, and he thought she smiled. Her fur was indeed sleek and perfect.

He showed his erection to his mother. She inspected it gravely; it stuck out of his fur like a splinter of ice.

"Soon you will have a choice to make."

"What choice?"

But she would not reply. She waddled away and dropped into the water.

The erection faded after a while, but it came back. More and more frequently, in fact.

He showed it to Frazil.

Her fur ruffled up into a ball. "It's small," she said dubiously. "Do you know what to do?"

"I think so. I've watched the Bull."

"All right."

She turned her back, looking over her shoulder at him, and reached for her genital slit.

But now a fat arm slammed into his back. He crashed to the ice, falling painfully on his penis, which shrank back immediately.

It was the Bull, his father. The huge man was a mountain of flesh and muscle, silhouetted against a violet sky. He hauled out his own penis from under his graying fur. It was a fat, battered lump of flesh. He waggled it at Night-Dawn. "I'm the Bull. Not you. Frazil is mine."

Now Night-Dawn understood the choice his mother had set out before him.

He felt something gather within him. Not anger: a sense of wrongness.

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"I won't fight you," he said to the Bull. "Humans shouldn't behave like this."

The Bull roared, opened his mouth to display his canines, and turned away from him.

Frazil slipped into the water, to evade the Bull.

Night-Dawn was left alone, frustrated, baffled.

As winter approached, a sense of oppression, of wrongness, gathered over Night-Dawn, and his mood darkened like the days.

People did *nothing* but feed and breed and die.

He watched the Bull. Behind the old man's back, even as he bullied and assaulted the smaller males, some of the other men approached the women and girls and coupled furtively. It happened all the time. Probably the group would have died out long ago if only the children of the Bull were permitted to be conceived.

The Bull was an absurdity, then, even as he dominated the little group. Night-Dawn wondered if the Bull was truly his father.

...Sometimes at night he watched the flags of night dawn ripple over the mountains. He wondered why the night dawns should come there, and nowhere else.

Perhaps the air was thicker there. Perhaps it was warmer beyond the mountains; perhaps there were people there.

But there was little time for reflection.

It got colder, fiercely so.

As the ice holes began to freeze over, the people emerged reluctantly from the water, standing on the hardening ice.

In a freezing hole, a slush of ice crystal clumps would gather. His mother called that frazil. Then, when the slush had condensed to form a solid surface, it took on a dull matte appearance — grease ice. The waves beneath the larger holes made the grease ice gather in wide, flat pancakes, with here and there stray, protruding crystals, called congelation. At last, the new ice grew harder and compressed with groans and cracks, into pack ice.

There were lots of words for ice.

And after the holes were frozen over the water — and their only food supply — was cut off, for six months.

When the blizzards came, the huddle began.

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The adults and children — some of them little fat balls of fur barely able to walk — came together, bodies pressed close, enveloping Night-Dawn in a welcome warmth, the shallow swell of their breathing pressing against him.

The snow, flecked with ice splinters, came at them horizontally. Night-Dawn tucked his head as deep as he could into the press of bodies, keeping his eyes squeezed closed.

Night fell. Day returned. He slept, in patches, standing up.

Sometimes he could hear people talking. But then the wind rose to a scream, drowning human voices.

The days wore away, still shortening, as dark as the nights.

The group shifted, subtly. People were moving around him. He got colder. Suddenly somebody moved away, a fat man, and Night-Dawn found himself exposed to the wind. The cold cut into him, shocking him awake.

He tried to push back into the mass of bodies, to regain the warmth.

The disturbance spread like a ripple through the group. He saw heads raised, eyes crusted with sleep and snow. With the group's tightness broken, a mass of hot air rose from the compressed bodies, steaming, frosting, bright in the double-shadowed Moonlight.

Here was No-Sun, blocking his way. "Stay out there. You have to take your turn."

"But it's *cold.*"

She turned away.

He tucked his head under his arm and turned his back to the wind. He stood the cold as long as he could.

Then, following the lead of others, he worked his way around the rim of the group, to its leeward side. At least here he was sheltered. And after a time more came around, shivering and iced up from their time to windward, and gradually he was encased once more in warmth.

Isolated on their scrap of ice, with no shelter save each other's bodies from the wind and snow, the little group of humans huddled in silence. As they took their turns at the windward side, the group shifted slowly across the ice, a creeping mat of fur.

Sometimes children were born onto the ice. The people pushed

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around closely, to protect the newborn, and its mother would tuck it away into the warmth of her body. Occasionally one of them fell away, and remained where she or he lay, as the group moved on.

This was the huddle: a black disc of fur and flesh and human bones, swept by the storms of Earth's unending winter.

A hundred thousand years after the Collision, all humans had left was each other.

Spring came slowly.

Dwarfed by the desolate, rocky landscape, bereft of shelter, the humans scratched at their isolated puddle of ice, beginning the year's feeding.

Night-Dawn scraped ice from his eyes. He felt as if he were waking from a year-long sleep. This was his second spring, and it would be the summer of his manhood. He would father children, teach them, and protect them through the coming winter. Despite the depletion of his winter fat, he felt strong, vigorous.

He found Frazil. They stood together, wordless, on the thick early spring ice.

Somebody roared in his ear, hot foul breath on his neck.

It was, of course, the Bull. The old man would not see another winter; his ragged fur lay loose on his huge, empty frame, riven by the scars of forgotten, meaningless battles. But he was still immense and strong, still the Bull.

Without preamble, the Bull sank his teeth into Night-Dawn's neck, and pulled away a lump of flesh, which he chewed noisily.

Night-Dawn backed away, appalled, breathing hard, blood running down his fur.

Frazil and No-Sun were here with him.

"Challenge him," No-Sun said.

"I don't want to fight."

"Then let him die," Frazil said. "He is old and stupid. We can couple despite him." There was a bellow. The Bull was facing him, pawing at the ice with a great scaly foot.

"I don't wish to fight you," Night-Dawn said.

The Bull laughed, and lumbered forward, wheezing.

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Night-Dawn stood his ground, braced his feet against the ice, and put his head down.

The Bull's roar turned to alarm, and he tried to stop; but his feet could gain no purchase.

His mouth slammed over Night-Dawn's skull. Night-Dawn screamed as the Bull's teeth grated through his fur and flesh to his very bone.

They bounced off each other. Night-Dawn felt himself tumbling back, and finished up on his backside on the ice. His chest felt crushed; he labored to breathe. He could barely see through the blood streaming into his eyes.

The Bull was lying on his back, his loose belly hoisted toward the violet sky. He was feeling his mouth with his fingers.

He let out a long, despairing moan.

No-Sun helped Night-Dawn to his feet. "You did it. *You smashed his teeth*, Night-Dawn. He'll be dead in days."

"I didn't mean to — "

His mother leaned close. "You're the Bull now. You can couple with who you like. Even me, if you want to."

"...Night-Dawn."

Here came Frazil. She was smiling. She turned her back to him, bent over, and pulled open her genital slit. His penis rose in response, without his volition.

He coupled with her quickly. He did it at the center of a circle of watching, envious, calculating men. It brought him no joy, and they parted without words.

He avoided the Bull until the old man had starved to death, gums bleeding from ice cuts, and the others had dumped his body into a water hole.

For Night-Dawn, everything was different after that.

He was the Bull. He could couple with who he liked. He stayed with Frazil. But even coupling with Frazil brought him little pleasure.

One day he was challenged by another young man called One-Tusk, over a woman Night-Dawn barely knew, called Ice-Cloud.

"Fight, damn you," One-Tusk lisped.

"We shouldn't fight. I don't care about Ice-Cloud."

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One-Tusk growled, pursued him for a while, then gave up. Night-Dawn saw him try to mate with one of the women, but she laughed at him and pushed him away.

Frazil came to him. "We can't live like this. You're the Bull. Act like it."

"To fight, to eat, to huddle, to raise children, to die.... There must be more, Frazil."

She sighed. "Like what?"

"The Collision. Our purpose."

She studied him. "Night-Dawn, listen to me. The Collision is a pretty story. Something to make us feel better, while we suck scum out of ice."

That was Frazil, he thought fondly. Practical. Unimaginative.

"Anyhow," she said, "where are the people we are supposed to help?"

He pointed to the western horizon: the rising ground, the place beyond the blue-gray mountains. "There, perhaps."

THE NEXT DAY, he called together the people. They stood in ranks on the ice, their fur spiky, rows of dark shapes in an empty landscape.

"We are all humans," he said boldly. "The Collision threw us here, onto the ice." Night-Dawn pointed to the distant mountains. "We must go there. Maybe there are people there. Maybe they are waiting for us, to huddle with them."

Somebody laughed.

"Why now?" asked the woman, Ice-Cloud.

"If not now, when? Now is no different from any other time, on the ice. I'll go alone if I have to."

People started to walk away, back to the ice holes.

All, except for Frazil and No-Sun and One-Tusk.

No-Sun, his mother, said, "You'll die if you go alone. I suppose it's my fault you're like this."

One-Tusk said, "Do you really think there are people in the mountains?"

"Please don't go," Frazil said. "This is our summer. You will waste your life."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You're the Bull. You have everything we can offer."

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"It's not enough."

He turned his back, faced the mountains and began to walk.

He walked past the droppings and blood smears and scars in the ice, the evidence of humans.

He stopped and looked back.

The people had lined up to watch him go — all except for two men who were fighting viciously, no doubt contesting his succession, and a man and woman who were coupling vigorously. And except for Frazil and No-Sun and One-Tusk, who padded across the ice after him.

He turned and walked on, until he reached bare, untrodden ice.

After the first day of walking, the ice got thinner.

At last they reached a place where there was no free water beneath, the ice firmly bonded to a surface of dark rock. And when they walked a little further, the rock bed itself emerged from beneath the ice.

Night-Dawn stared at it in fascination and fear. It was black and deep and hard under his feet, and he missed the slick compressibility of ice.

The next day they came to another ice pool: smaller than their own, but a welcome sight nonetheless. They ran gleefully onto its cool white surface. They scraped holes into the ice, and fed deeply.

They stayed a night. But the next day they walked onto rock again, and Night-Dawn could see no more ice ahead.

The rock began to rise, becoming a slope.

They had no food. Occasionally they took scrapes at the rising stone, but it threatened to crack their teeth.

At night the wind was bitter, spilling off the flanks of the mountains, and they huddled as best they could, their backs to the cold, their faces and bellies together.

"We'll die," One-Tusk would whisper.

"We won't die," Night-Dawn said. "We have our fat."

"That's supposed to last us through the winter," hissed No-Sun.

One-Tusk shivered and moved a little more to leeward. "I wished to father a child," he said. "By Ice-Cloud. I could not. Ice-Cloud mocked me. After that nobody would couple with me."

"Ice-Cloud should have come to you, Night-Dawn. You are the Bull," No-Sun muttered.

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"I'm sorry," Night-Dawn said to One-Tusk. "I have fathered no children yet. Not every coupling — "

One-Tusk said, "Do you really think it will be warm in the mountains?"

"Try to sleep now," said Frazil sensibly.

They were many days on the rising rock. The air grew thinner. The sky was never brighter than a deep violet blue.

The mountains, at last, grew nearer. On clear days the sun cast long shadows that reached out to them.

Night-Dawn saw a gap in the mountains, a cleft through which he could sometimes see a slice of blue-violet sky. They turned that way, and walked on.

Still they climbed; still the air thinned.

They came to the pass through the mountains. It was a narrow gully. Its mouth was broad, and there was broken rock, evidently cracked off the gully sides.

Night-Dawn led them forward.

Soon the walls narrowed around him, the rock slick with hard gray ice. His feet slipped from under him, and he banged knees and hips against bone-hard ice. He was not, he knew, made for climbing. And besides, he had never been surrounded before, except in the huddle. He felt trapped, confined.

He persisted, doggedly.

His world closed down to the aches of his body, the gully around him, the search for the next handhold.

...The air was *hot.*

He stopped, stunned by this realization.

With renewed excitement, he lodged his stubby fingers in crevices in the rock, and hauled himself upward.

At last the gully grew narrower.

He reached the top and dragged himself up over the edge, panting, fur steaming.

...There were no people here.

He was standing at the rim of a great bowl cut into the hard black rock. And at the base of the bowl was a red liquid, bubbling slowly. Steam

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gathered in great clouds over the bubbling pool, laced with yellowish fumes that stank strongly. It was a place of rock and gas, not of people.

Frazil came to stand beside him. She was breathing hard, and her mouth was wide open, her arms spread wide, to shed heat.

They stood before the bowl of heat, drawn by some ancient imperative to the warmth, and yet repelled by its suffocating thickness.

"The Collision," she said.

"What?"

"Once, the whole world was covered with such pools. Rock, melted by the great heat of the Collision."

"The Collision is just a story, you said."

She grunted. "I've been wrong before."

His disappointment was crushing. "Nobody could live here. There is warmth, but it is poisonous." He found it hard even to think, so huge was his sense of failure.

He stood away from the others and looked around.

Back the way they had come, the uniform hard blackness was broken only by scattered islands of gray-white: ice pools, Night-Dawn knew, like the one he had left behind.

Turning, he could see the sweep of the mountains clearly: he was breaching a great inward-curving wall, a great complex string of peaks that spread from horizon to horizon, gaunt under the blue-purple sky.

And ahead of him, ice had gathered in pools and crevasses at the feet of the mountains, lapping against the rock walls as if frustrated — save in one place, where a great tongue of ice had broken through. *Glacier,* he thought.

He saw that they could walk around the bowl of bubbling liquid rock and reach the head of the glacier, perhaps before night fell, and then move on, beyond these mountains. Hope sparked. Perhaps what he sought lay there.

"I'm exhausted," No-Sun said, a pillar of fur slumped against a heap of rock. "We should go back."

Night-Dawn, distracted by his plans, turned to her. "Why?"

"We are creatures of cold. Feel how you burn up inside your fat. This is not our place..."

"Look," breathed One-Tusk, coming up to them.

He was carrying a rock he'd cracked open. Inside there was a thin line

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of red and black. Algae, perhaps. And, in a hollow in the rock, small insects wriggled, their red shells bright.

Frazil fell on the rock, gnawing at it eagerly.

The others quickly grabbed handfuls of rocks and began to crack them open.

They spent the night in a hollow at the base of the glacier.

In the morning they clambered up onto its smooth, rock-littered surface. The ice groaned as it was compressed by its forced passage through the mountains, which towered above them to either side, blue-gray and forbidding.

At the glacier's highest point, they saw that the river of ice descended to an icy plain. And the plain led to another wall of mountains, so remote it was almost lost in the horizon's mist.

"More walls," groaned One-Tusk. "Walls that go on forever."

"I don't think so," said Night-Dawn. He swept his arm along the line of the distant peaks, which glowed pink in the sun. "I think they curve. You see?"

"I can't tell," muttered No-Sun, squinting.

With splayed toes on the ice, Night-Dawn scraped three parallel curves — then, tentatively, he joined them up into concentric circles. "Curved walls of mountains. Maybe that's what we're walking into," he said. "Like ripples in a water hole."

"Ripples, in rock?" Frazil asked skeptically.

"If the Collision stories are true, it's possible."

No-Sun tapped at the center of his picture. "And what will we find here?"

"I don't know."

They rested awhile, and moved on.

The glacier began to descend so rapidly they had some trouble keeping their feet. The ice here, under tension, was cracked, and there were many ravines.

At last they came to a kind of cliff, hundreds of times taller than Night-Dawn. The glacier was tumbling gracefully into the ice plain, great blocks of it carving away. This ice sheet was much wider than the pool they had left behind, so wide, in fact, it lapped to left and right as far as they

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could see and all the way to the far mountains. Ice lay on the surface in great broken sheets, but clear water, blue-black, was visible in the gaps.

It was —. together they found the word, deep in their engineered memories — it was a sea.

"Perhaps this is a circular sea," One-Tusk said, excited. "Perhaps it fills up the ring between the mountains."

"Perhaps."

They clambered down the glacier, caution and eagerness warring in Night-Dawn's heart.

There was a shallow beach here, of shattered stone. The beach was littered with droppings, black and white streaks, and half-eaten krill.

In his short life, Night-Dawn had seen no creatures save fish, krill, algae and humans. But this beach did not bear the mark of humans like themselves. He struggled to imagine what might live here.

Without hesitation, One-Tusk ran to a slab of pack ice, loosely anchored. With a yell he dropped off the end into the water.

No-Sun fluffed up her fur. "I don't like it here — "

Bubbles were coming out of the water, where One-Tusk had dived.

Night-Dawn rushed to the edge of the water.

One-Tusk surfaced, screaming, in a flurry of foam. Half his scalp was torn away, exposing pink raw flesh, the white of bone.

An immense shape loomed out of the water after him: Night-Dawn glimpsed a pink mouth, peg-like teeth, a dangling wattle, small black eyes. The huge mouth closed around One-Tusk's neck.

He had time for one more scream — and then he was gone, dragged under the surface again.

The thick, sluggish water grew calm; last bubbles broke the surface, pink with blood.

Night-Dawn and the others huddled together.

"He is dead," Frazil said.

"We all die," said No-Sun. "Death is easy."

"Did you see its eyes?" Frazil asked.

"Yes. *Human*," No-Sun said bleakly. "Not like us, but human."

"Perhaps there were other ways to survive the Collision."

No-Sun turned on her son. "Are we supposed to huddle with that, Night-Dawn?"

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Night-Dawn, shocked, unable to speak, was beyond calculation. He explored his heart, searching for grief for loyal, confused One-Tusk.

THEY STAYED on the beach for many days, fearful of the inhabited water. They ate nothing but scavenged scraps of crushed, half-rotten krill left behind by whatever creatures had lived here.

"We should go back," said No-Sun at last.

"We can't," Night-Dawn whispered. "It's already too late. We couldn't get back to the huddle before winter."

"But we can't stay here," Frazil said.

"So we go on." No-Sun laughed, her voice thin and weak. "We go on, across the sea, until we can't go on anymore."

"Or until we find shelter," Night-Dawn said.

"Oh, yes," No-Sun whispered. "There is that."

So they walked on, over the pack ice.

This was no mere pond, as they had left behind; this was an ocean.

The ice was thin, partially melted, poorly packed. Here and there the ice was piled up into cliffs and mountains that towered over them; the ice hills were eroded, shaped smooth by the wind, carved into fantastic arches and spires and hollows. The ice was every shade of blue. And when the sun set, its light filled the ice shapes with pink, red and orange.

There was a cacophony of noise: groans and cracks, as the ice moved around them. But there were no human voices, save their own: only the empty noise of the ice — and the occasional murmur, Night-Dawn thought, of whatever giant beasts inhabited this huge sea.

They walked for days. The mountain chain they had left behind dwindled, dipping into the mist of the horizon; and the chain ahead of them approached with stultifying slowness. He imagined looking down on himself, a small, determined speck walking steadily across this great, molded landscape, working toward the mysteries of the center.

Food was easy to find. The slushy ice was soft and easy to break through.

No-Sun would walk only slowly now. And she would not eat. Her memory of the monster that had snapped up One-Tusk was too strong. Night-Dawn even braved the water to bring her fish, but they were

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strange: ghostly-white creatures with flattened heads, sharp teeth. No-Sun pushed them away, saying she preferred to consume her own good fat. And so she grew steadily more wasted.

Until there came a day when, waking, she would not move at all. She stood at the center of a fat, stable ice-floe, a pillar of loose flesh, rolls of fur cascading down a frame leached of fat.

Night-Dawn stood before her, punched her lightly, cajoled her.

"Leave me here," she said. "It's my time anyhow."

"No. It isn't right."

She laughed, and fluid rattled on her lungs. "Right. Wrong. You're a dreamer. You always were. It's my fault, probably."

She subsided, as if deflating, and fell back onto the ice.

He knelt and cradled her head in his lap. He stayed there all night, the cold of the ice seeping through the flesh of his knees.

In the morning, stiff with the cold, they took her to the edge of the ice floe and tipped her into the water, for the benefit of the creatures of this giant sea.

After more days of walking, the ice grew thin, the water beneath shallow.

Another day of this and they came to a slope of hard black rock, that pushed its way out of the ice and rose up before them.

The black rock was hard-edged and cold under Night-Dawn's feet, its rise unrelenting. As far as he could see to left and right, the ridge was solid, unbroken, with no convenient passes for them to follow, the sky lidded over by cloud.

They grasped each other's hands and pressed up the slope.

The climb exhausted Night-Dawn immediately. And there was nothing to eat or drink, here on the high rocks, not so much as a scrap of ice. Soon, even the air grew thin; he struggled to drag energy from its pale substance.

When they slept, they stood on hard black rock. Night-Dawn feared and hated the rock; it was an enemy, rooted deep in the Earth.

On the fourth day of this they entered the clouds, and he could not even see where his next step should be placed. With the thin, icy moisture in his lungs and spreading on his fur he felt trapped, as if under some

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infinite ice layer, far from any air hole. He struggled to breathe, and if he slept, he woke consumed by a thin panic. At such times he clung to Frazil and remembered who he was and where he had come from and why he had come so far. He was a human being, and he had a mission that he would fulfill.

Then, one morning, they broke through the last ragged clouds.

Though it was close to midday, the sky was as dark as he had ever seen it, a deep violet blue. The only clouds were thin sheets of ice crystals, high above. And — he saw, gasping with astonishment — there were *stars* shining, even now, in the middle of the sunlit day.

The slope seemed to reach a crest, a short way ahead of him. They walked on. The air was thin, a whisper in his lungs, and he was suspended in silence; only the rasp of Frazil's shallow breath, the soft slap of their footsteps on the rock, broke up the stillness.

He reached the crest. The rock wall descended sharply from here, he saw, soon vanishing into layers of fat, fluffy clouds.

And, when he looked ahead, he saw a mountain.

Far ahead of them, dominating the horizon, it was a single peak that thrust out of scattered clouds, towering even over their elevated position here, its walls sheer and stark. Its flanks were girdled with ice, but the peak itself was bare black rock — too high even for ice to gather, he surmised — perhaps so high it thrust out of the very air itself.

It must be the greatest mountain in the world.

And beyond it there was a further line of mountains, he saw, like a line of broken teeth, marking the far horizon. When he looked to left and right, he could see how those mountains joined the crest he had climbed, in a giant unbroken ring around that great, central fist of rock.

It was a giant rock ripple, just as he had sketched in the ice. Perhaps this was the center, the very heart of the great systems of mountain rings and circular seas he had penetrated.

An ocean lapped around the base of the mountain. He could see that glaciers flowed down its heroic base, rivers of ice dwarfed by the mountain's immensity. There was ice in the ocean too — pack ice, and icebergs like great eroded islands, white, carved. Some manner of creatures were visible on the bergs, black and gray dots against the pristine white of the ice, too

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distant for him to make out. But this sea was mostly melted, a band of blue-black.

The slope of black rock continued below him — far, far onward, until it all but disappeared into the misty air at the base of this bowl of land. But he could see that it reached a beach of some sort, of shattered, eroded rock sprinkled with snow, against which waves sluggishly lapped.

There was a belt of land around the sea, cradled by the ring mountains, fringed by the sea. And it was covered by life, great furry sheets of it. From this height it looked like an encrustation of algae. But he knew there must be living things there much greater in scale than any he had seen before.

"...It is a bowl," Frazil breathed.

"What?"

"Look down there. This is a great bowl, of clouds and water and light, on whose lip we stand. We will be safe down there, away from the rock and ice."

He saw she was right. This was indeed a bowl — presumably the great scar left where one or other of the Moons had torn itself loose of the Earth, just as the stories said. And these rings of mountains were ripples in the rock, frozen as if ice.

He forgot his hunger, his thirst, even the lack of air here; eagerly they began to hurry down the slope.

The air rapidly thickened.

But his breathing did not become any easier, for it grew *warm*, warmer than he had ever known it. Steam began to rise from his thick, heavy fur. He opened his mouth and raised his nostril flaps wide, sucking in the air. It was as if the heat of this giant sheltering bowl was now, at the last, driving them back.

But they did not give up their relentless descent, and he gathered the last of his strength.

The air beneath them cleared further.

Overwhelmed, Night-Dawn stopped.

The prolific land around the central sea was divided into neat shapes, he saw now, and here and there smoke rose. It was a made landscape. The work of people.

Humans were sheltered here. It was a final irony, that people should find shelter at the bottom of the great pit dug out of the Earth by the world-wrecking Collision.

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...And there was a color to that deep, cupped world, emerging now from the mist. Something he had never seen before; and yet the word for it dropped into place, just as had his first words after birth.

"*Green,*" Frazil said.

"Green. Yes..."

He was stunned by the brilliance of the color against the black rock, the dull blue-gray of the sea. But even as he looked into the pit of warmth and air, he felt a deep sadness. For he already knew he could never reach that deep shelter, peer up at the giant green living things; this body which shielded him from cold would allow heat to kill him.

Somebody spoke.

He cried out, spun around. Frazil was standing stock still, staring up.

There was a creature standing here. Like a tall, very skinny human.

It was a human, he saw. A woman. Her face was small and neat, and there was barely a drop of fat on her, save around the hips, buttocks and breasts. Her chest was small. She had a coat of some fine fur — no, he realized with shock; she was wearing a false skin, that hugged her bare flesh tightly. She was carrying green stuff, food perhaps, in a basket of false skin.

She was twice his height.

Her eyes were undoubtedly human, though, as human as his, and her gaze was locked on his face. And in her eyes, he read fear.

Fear, and disgust.

He stepped forward. "We have come to help you," he said.

"Yes," said Frazil.

"We have come far — "

The tall woman spoke again, but he could not understand her. Even her voice was strange — thin, emanating from that shallow chest. She spoke again, and pointed, down toward the surface of the sea, far below.

Now he looked more closely he could see movement on the beach. Small dots, moving around. People, perhaps, like this girl. Some of them were small. Children, running free. Many children.

The woman turned, and started climbing away from them, down the slope toward her world, carrying whatever she had gathered from these high banks. She was shaking a fist at them now. She even bent to pick up

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a sharp stone and threw it toward Frazil; it fell short, clattering harmlessly.

"I don't understand," Frazil said.

Night-Dawn thought of the loathing he had seen in the strange woman's eyes. He saw himself through her eyes: squat, fat, waddling, as if deformed.

He felt shame. "We are not welcome here," he said.

"We must bring the others here," Frazil was saying.

"And what then? Beg to be allowed to stay, to enter the warmth? No. We will go home."

"Home? To a place where people live a handful of winters, and must scrape food from ice with their teeth? How can that compare to *this*?"

He took her hands. "But this is not for us. We are monsters to these people. As they are to us. And we cannot live here."

She stared into the pit of light and green. "But in time, our children might learn to live there. Just as we learned to live on the ice."

The longing in her voice was painful. He thought of the generations who had lived out their short, bleak lives on the ice. He thought of his mother, who had sought to protect him to the end; poor One-Tusk, who had died without seeing the people of the mountains; dear, loyal Frazil, who had walked to the edge of the world at his side.

"Listen to me. Let these people have their hole in the ground. We have a *world*. We can live anywhere. We must go back and tell our people so."

She sniffed. "Dear Night-Dawn. Always dreaming. But first we must eat, for winter is coming."

"Yes. First we eat."

They inspected the rock that surrounded them. There was green here, he saw now, thin traces of it that clung to the surface of the rock. In some places it grew away from the rock face, brave little balls of it no bigger than his fist, and here and there fine fur-like sproutings.

They bent, reaching together for the green shoots.

The shadows lengthened. The sun was descending toward the circular sea, and one of Earth's two Moons was rising.

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Though a native of the U.S. South, James Sallis seems more like a French writer than an American. He's one of those roving intellects who won't stick to any one subject or genre. In the early 1970s, he was an editor of New Worlds *and a frequent contributor to the* Orbit *anthologies. During the '80s, most of his writing consisted of poetry and musicology. In the extremely productive past decade, he has published a spy novel, a collection of essays on noir writers, a translation of Raymond Queneau, a volume or two of poetry, many reviews, and an acclaimed series of mysteries. His most recent book is one of those mysteries,* Bluebottle, *and he is currently working on a biography of Chester Himes.*

None of the preceding information will prepare you for the strange story that follows. Jim says it was inspired by a trip to the American Museum of Natural History. His intellect certainly wanders, doesn't it!

Dear Floods of Her Hair

By James Sallis

MURIEL LEFT ME, LEFT US, I should say, on Monday. The tap in the kitchen sink sprang a leak, spewing a mist of cold water onto sheets I spread on the floor, and a hummingbird, furious that she'd forgotten to refill its feeder just outside, beat at the window again and again. By the time friends, family, and mourners began arriving, Thursday around noon, preparations were almost complete.

First thing I did was draw up a schedule. Muriel would have been proud of me, I thought as I sat at the kitchen table with pen and a pad of her notepaper, water from the spewing tap slowly soaking into the corduroy slippers she'd given me last Christmas. Here I'd always been the improviser, treading water, swimming reflexly for whatever shore showed itself, while Muriel weighed out options like an assayer, made lists and kept files, saw that laundry got done *before* the last sock fell, shoehorned order into our lives. And now it was all up to me.

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Somewhere between *16* and *20* on my list, the hummingbird gave up its strafing runs and simply hovered an inch from the glass, glaring in at me. They could be remarkably aggressive. Seventeen species of them where we lived. Anna's hummers, Costa's and black-chinned around all year, Rufous, calliope and the rest migrating in from Mexico or various mountain ranges. In that way birds have, males are the colorful ones, mating rituals often spectacular. Some will dive ninety feet straight up, making sure sunlight strikes them in such a way that their metallic colors flare dramatically for females watching from below. These females are dull so as to be inconspicuous on nests the size of walnuts.

Muriel loved this place of cactus and endless sky, mountains looming like the world's own jagged edge, loved the cholla, prickly pear, palo verde, geckos with feet spurred into the back of our windowscreens at night.

Most of all, though, she loved hummingbirds. Even drew a tiny, stylized hummer for stationery, envelopes, and cards and had it silkscreened onto the sweatshirts she often wore as she sat in front of the computer, daily attending to details of the business (cottage industries, they used to call them) that kept us comfortable here.

That same hummer hovered silently in the upper left corner of the notepad as I inscribed *24*.

I gave it a pointed beard and round glasses.

Favorite bird. Hummingbird. Favorite music. *Wozzeck*, Arvo Pärt's *Litany*. Favorite color. Emerald green. Favorite poem. One by Dylan Thomas.

> The tombstone told when she died.
> Her two surnames stopped me still.
> A virgin married at rest.

Memories of my father were also in mind, of course. The one who taught me. I was ten years old when it began, sitting on the floor in a safe corner with knees drawn up reading H.G. Wells, a favorite still. Suddenly I felt *watched*, and when I glanced up, Father's eyes were on me. Good book? he asked. At that point I couldn't imagine a bad one. Just that some were better than others. I lit the next one off the smoldering butt of the last. They all are, I told him. No, he said. A lot of them just make up things.

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Mrs. Abneg spoke then. Charles: he's too young, she said. Father looked at her. No. He's ready. Earlier than most, I agree, but this is *our* son. He's not like the rest. Mrs. Abneg ducked her head. The female must be dull so as to be inconspicuous on the nest.

And so I was allowed for the first time into my father's basement workshop. I could barely see over the tops of the sinks, benches, the tilted stainless-steel table with its runnels and drains. Shelves filled with magical jars and pegboards hung with marvelous tools loomed above like promises I would someday keep.

That first session went on for perhaps an hour. I understood little of what my father said then, though whenever he asked was something or another clear I always nodded dutifully yes. Knowledge is a kind of osmosis. And soon enough, of course, our time together in the basement workroom fulfilled itself. Others found themselves shut out. For a time I wondered what Mrs. Abneg or my younger brother might be doing there up above, but not for long. Procedures and practicums, the rigors of my apprenticeship, soon occupied my full attention and all free time. I had far too much to do to squander myself on idle thoughts.

Just as now, I thought.

I set to work.

As I worked, I sang *Wozzeck*.

Drudgery goes best when attention's directed elsewhere — not that pain and loss don't nibble away at us then. Stopping only to feed or rest myself when I could go on no longer, shedding gloves like old skin, I performed as my father taught me. Handsaws, augers and tongs, tools for which there were no names, came into use. I tipped fluids from bright-colored decanters, changed gloves, went on.

> She cried her white-dressed limbs were bare
> And her red lips were kissed black

Wozzeck was the piece Muriel and I had decided on; with tutorials twice a week and daily practice, I'd got it down as well as might be expected. Not a professional job, certainly, but competent. I sang the parts in rotation, altering pitch and range as required, hearing my own transformed voice roll back from the cellar's recesses.

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I'd never really understood painting, poetry, old music, things like that — opera least of all. Whatever I couldn't weigh, quantify, plot on a chart, I had to wonder if it existed at all. I knew how important all this was to Muriel, of course. I'd sit beside her through that aria she loved from *Turandot*, "Nessun dorma," or the second movement of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet watching tears course down her face. I'd see her put down a book and for a moment there'd be this blank look, this stillness, as though she were lost between worlds: deciding.

Often Muriel and I would discuss how we'd come together, the chance and circumspectness of it, other times the many ways in which, jigsawlike, our curves and turnings had become a whole. Then, teasing relentlessly, she would argue that, as an anthropologist, I was not truly a scientist. But I was. And who more alert to the place of ritual in lives?

> I died before bedtime came
> But my womb was bellowing
> And I felt with my bare fall
> A blazing red harsh head tear up
> And the dear floods of his hair.

My father trained me well. I had not expected ever to bring my skills into practice so soon, of course. How could we have known? Officers had one day appeared at the door just past noon. One was young, perhaps twenty, undergrowth of beard, single discreet earring, the other middle-aged, hair folded over to cover balding scalp. I was twelve. Answered the door wearing shorts and a T-shirt that read *Stress? What Stress?!* Mr. Abneg? the officers addressed me — so I knew. The older one confirmed it: Father was gone, he'd stepped unaware into one of the city's many sinkholes. And so Mrs. Abneg became my responsibility. I had taken care of her, just as Father taught me. Fine workmanship. He would have been proud.

The skull must be boiled (Father taught, all those years ago) until it becomes smooth as stone, then reattached.

This I accomplished with a battery-driven drill and eighteen silver pins from the cloisonnéd box my father passed on to me, his father's before him. Singing Berg the whole while. I'd learned *all* my lessons well.

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Legs must fall just so on the chair.

One arm at rest. The other upraised. Each finger arranged according to intricate plan.

Exacting, demanding work.

Fine music, though.

By Thursday Muriel looked more beautiful than ever before — I know this is hard to believe. That afternoon I lifted the wig from its case and placed it on her. Draped the blue veil across the preserved flesh of her chest.

(I, too, can be practical, my dear, see? I can make plans, follow through, take charge. Do what needs be done. And finally have become an artist of sorts in my own right, I suppose.)

The doorbell rang.

Thank you all for coming.

Glasses clink. Steaming cups are raised. There is enough food here to feed the city's teeming poor. I circulate among our guests, Uncle Van, Mrs. Abneg's sister, cousins and nephews, close friends. Some, I can no longer speak to, of course. To others I present small boxes wrapped in bright paper: a toenail or fingernail perhaps, sliver of bone, divot of pickled flesh.

Yes. She looks beautiful, doesn't she?

Outside, whispering, night arrives. No whispers in here, as family, friends, and mourners move from lit space to lit space. They manipulate Muriel's limbs into various symbolic patterns. Group about her. Pictures are taken.

It's time, Muriel's brother says, stepping beside me.

And *I* say, Please — as instantly the room falls quiet.

I want to tell you all how much I love her.

I want to tell you we'll be happy now. Everything is in place.

I want to tell you how much we will miss you all.

Listen....

One day you'll walk out, a day like any other, to fetch laundry, pick up coffee at the store, drop off mail. You'll take the same route you always do, turn corners as familiar to you as the back of your hand, thinking of nothing in particular. And that's when it will happen. The beauty of this world will fall upon you, push the very words and breath from your lungs. Suddenly, irrevocably, the beauty of this world will break your heart; and lifting hand to face, you will find tears there.

Those tears will be the same as mine, now.

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How far would you go to get revenge on a bully? And how much would you trust a woman purported to be a witch?

Nick de Kruyff is a professional actor whose previous writing includes a story in the Canadian sf magazine On Spec *and numerous industrial comedy sketches sold to corporations. He lives in Toronto, Ontario, and is currently finishing up a novel. In regard to this story, he says that when his mother grew up in Barbados, she had a nanny "with a sharp smile and leathery lips." He met her once when he was young and she whispered something in his ear that came true many years later (followed then by this tale).*

Burger's Head

By Nicholas de Kruyff

READING THE PAPER, IGNORING the half-finished income tax forms scattered on my desk, idly pondering what magic hat I can find to pull my daughter's tuition from, I come across the witch's obituary in the paper. Involuntarily, my neck itches.

I think of Larry. We drifted apart after. Never could forgive him for leaving me with Riverty, although he was only gone ten minutes and that was just to get some grownups to come help. He ended up being the super at one of those apartment buildings along Kingston Road, the ones that have rust stains stretching from the balconies. That fits.

And then Burger. Burger. Dead three years from a heart attack, from cheeseburgers, from sitting behind a complaints desk at Walmart, from drinking a six of Coors before falling into a comatose sleep, from flipping past the Bally Fitness ads to get to the football scores, from taking care of Lisa after the car accident left her so she couldn't feed herself or go to the toilet alone. He looked out for her as a big brother should. Always did.

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I didn't go to the funeral. I'd seen him dead once already; me and Larry killed him when we were eleven. I don't think I could have handled it again.

We tied Burger to the tracks, then waited for the train, just as the witch told us.

The problem was how to cut off Burger's head without me or Larry actually doing the deed. No way me or Larry would put an axe or chainsaw to our friend's outstretched neck. And we couldn't think of any other way to cut someone's head clean away from their body.

It was Auntie Martha who suggested the train. We knew about the tree-lined bend in the tracks; the engineer would never see a body strapped there till it was too late to stop. It seemed perfect.

One rail ran under Burger's neck. Yellow nylon rope held his wrists and ankles in overlapping coils.

"Guys? I can't do this. Let me up."

Burger's eyes begged us, his thick cheeks flattened by gravity and flushed, strands of wet honey hair stuck to his forehead, his belly leaked out his untucked T-shirt.

"We all agreed," I said. "You want Riverty to get Lisa like he said? You want him to rape your little sister?"

"Let me up."

"Don't worry, we won't desert you. All for one — "

" — and one for all." Only Larry joined in. Burger's lips quivered.

"Let me up...guys, let me up..."

We didn't answer.

"Chrissakes, let me up!"

"Auntie Martha said we had to have faith."

"How is me dying going to stop Riverty?"

"We have to have *faith*. Right, Larry?"

Larry turned away, threw a stone that clicked off the tracks. His shoes were undone. Always were. Like his clothes were always stained with dirt. He bragged his mom didn't wash clothes, just let them lie around for a week airing out. I'd never been invited to Larry's house so I didn't know if it was true or not.

"What if this is what *she* wants, not us." Burger said. "She *is* a witch."

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My dad would have called her a crazy old nigger. He didn't live with me and Mom anymore. He left.

"The magic will save you."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"It will. Has to. We paid for it."

It was real magic, Tolkien magic, where lightning would split the Earth and the sky would turn to blood and Nazgûl lurking in the playground grass would rise and smite Chris Riverty. It was the kind of magic I'd hoped for all my life, hoped it was real and knew it could never be. But it was real. And it had a price.

"Guys...let me up..."

WE WENT BACK to Auntie Martha on a windy day when the sky looked like exhaust from a bus. Clouds raced by.

Auntie Martha lived in a wartime bungalow beside Corneal Park. She had no neighbors on either side, and her house creaked in the wind.

Everyone knew Auntie Martha, knew she was a witch. You'd see her on Sundays walking in the park. She'd wave. Everyone waved back. They didn't dare not.

Mom said she'd lost her husband a few years before. Said she was a widow.

Widow. Like the spider.

The glass in the front door was broken, only a couple of curving shards left, the opening covered with cardboard from a box of Louisiana Yams. We shuffled up, Mom's rose pillowcase strung between me and Larry, bulging with bribery. Burger knocked, tiny knuckle taps on the peeling green paint.

The door swung open. Auntie Martha stood grinning a crooked smile, one ivory tooth hanging over a leathery lip. Her hair, steel wool brushed with shoe polish and piled into a mound; a black Bride-of-Frankenstein.

"So you come back." A veined crooked finger pointed at the bag. "You brought me something, nah?"

We couldn't speak. I think Larry nodded.

"Give it me."

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We handed over our larceny; dime store candy we'd stolen and stockpiled for a month, purloined under jackets from neighborhood corner stores, malls, discount stores. We never went back to the same store twice. Not cause we were afraid. Just cause.

Her creamy eyes danced over crumbling butter tarts and lumps of stuck-together licorice, her mouth masticating in anticipation.

"Just you wait here while old me puts this nice bit of treats away."

We stood on cracked cement patio stones, feet shuffling, heads twisting, looking at old tires piled in the yard, the hull of a burned-out car, dandelions yellowing the grass, anywhere but the door. Years went by. Maybe she'd forgotten us? Wanted us to go? The house creaked. No, not creaked, *moaned.* Burger and Larry started inching towards the gate.

"Come on, let's go. We'll figure another way — "

The door flung open, locking us in place, heads snapped up and front. Frizzy hair poked into daylight. I smelled limes.

"Right nah, which one was the little boy having problems with bullies?"

Burger's hand drifted up like a week-old balloon. A wrinkled finger beckoned him. He slunk to her.

"Your name, child?"

"Burger, ma'am."

"Your real name."

"James L. Cearn."

"James Lionel Cearn. And the bully's name, what's that? Riverty? Chris Riverty and his gang?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She was good at witching. We'd never mentioned Riverty by name.

"Fine. Don't move."

If it'd been me I'd have run screaming, not stopped till I was under covers at home. Burger had guts. He stayed frozen. Her fingers did long division in the air around him, dividing and carrying the ether. After she'd done, Burger stepped back rubbing his eyes.

"Right nah, which of you friends is gone to carry the magic word?"

I looked at Larry and he looked at me. Neither of us wanted to have anything to do with it, you could see that.

Larry sighed finally, walked to the witch.

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"You is?"

"Lawrence Aaron Meekle."

"Listen close — "

She bent over him: vampire tableau, Larry's neck stretched out, face to sky, eyes squinted shut; the witch, lips hovering at the fleshy shell of Larry's ear, breathed into it. Larry shivered, his body shook. He stepped back. He looked like she'd told him the day he was going to die.

The witch's eyes grabbed me.

"Now you."

"Neil Seer, ma'am."

"Master Seer — come nah."

I stopped in front of the witch. Twig fingers dug in a pouch that hung from her neck, and out she pulled a small jam jar, the Black Watch tartan on its lid. The label soaked off. The jar was empty. The glass was clear as ice in water, shimmering with light. Her lips bowed and her hot breath defiled my ear.

"Take it, child. You'll know what to do with it when the time come."

I took the jar, careful not to touch the witch's autumn-leaf skin.

"Come near, all, listen what you must do..."

Burger's whining ate at my stomach. Half of me wanted to loosen his ropes, get out of here, forget all this. Larry chewed his lower lip like it was a stick of Juicy Fruit. He looked at me. We had to stay. We were the three musketeers. We had to kill Burger. Cut off his head.

"LET ME UP...please...please...come on...this ain't funny...Larry? ...Neil?...answer me...you're not going to let the train run over me, huh?"

Waiting for the train, it felt like I had to go to the bathroom. It felt like that the day Dad left. He hit her and he left. He looked at me on the way out the door. His eyes were soft, like he was sorry for what he'd done. Like he wanted to say something to me. He left. I went over to Mom, this crumpled ball of a person. If I were to blow on her she would have drifted away like dandelion fuzz. She was crying like a kid. Gently I stroked her hair. She hugged me. Made me promise I'd never go away.

You don't leave people like that.

"Train!"

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Here it came, all metal and speed with a single windshield eye and two engineer pupils and enough velocity to demolish a city block. All bearing down on Burger's torso.

"Remember! Stretch your neck when it comes."

Burger screamed. Acid burned my throat. Burger's hands twisted in the yellow nylon ropes. His cheeks, slick with tears, stretched to let screams out.

"Let me goooooooo!"

Larry stepped toward him. It was on his face, in the way his fingers twitched: he was going to let Burger up. After all we'd been through, he was deserting the plan. I grabbed Larry and pulled. We went over, falling, sliding down the embankment, my shins and forearms scratched bloody by gravel and thistles. Tumbling down into a patch of wild juniper at the bottom. Larry was on me. It took a moment to realize he was punching me, his fists soft balls that exploded on my face for an instant's pain.

"You killed him! You did! It's your fault!"

"The magic word! You got to say it! Martha said."

The thought struck him. He looked up. Couldn't see Burger or the tracks.

"I can't see him — I can't — "

"Guess — guess when it comes by — "

Couldn't hear Burger anymore; the train too close —

— the world was a roar and a rush and a hot wind that smelled of oil, blur of metalsteelglassnoise, pauses between cars like flickering light at the end of a movie. Faces — reading papers, sipping from Styrofoam cups, daydreaming with forehead on window — there and gone in a flicker. My chest beat with the turning wheels, connected through vibration with the movement, the loudness, the racing. The train was an angry speeding god that didn't care. Then it was gone. Doppler effect lowering pitch. The train was past.

I realized I was kneeling. I got up slowly. Larry's face was white and wide. He just stared into the space the train had been.

"Did you say it?"

He didn't answer. I don't think he heard. I shook him.

"Did you say the magic word?"

" — yeah. Neil, I think I was too late."

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"Come on."

We climbed the slope carefully. Cresting the top we saw Burger.

It was like cherry Jell-O had fallen from the cloud-piled sky, blood and Jell-O everywhere in spoonfuls and bowlfuls, splattered on oily gravel. Water squeezed out Larry's eyes.

"Oh man..."

"Yeah..."

Down the track the train was slowing, brake lights bright. Up along the tracks, a base length's distance away, was a football. Who would forget a football on train tracks?

"Come on!"

I ran to the football: Burger's head, eyes absently on the horizon, veins like worms squirming out the pink slash where his neck ended. Larry vomited. I wanted to vomit too, smelling the acid of Larry's stomach.

The train disgorged men wearing pointed caps like cops. Trotting back towards us. They had no faces at this distance.

"We gotta go!"

I picked up the head by the hair. I didn't look at it just in case it looked back.

"Let's go."

I TOOK OFF. I didn't look back. My gym teacher said you lose speed if you look back. So I didn't. The rhythm of running fell into me and I felt I could go on forever. I was numb. Burger's head banged my leg with every other stride. Behind me I could hear Larry's tortured breathing. I'd always been the fastest. I slowed to let him keep up.

Men followed us, but we lost them.

We didn't stop till the grass field of our public school. The sun slipping down behind one portable made the sky red and gold, the grass long and thick with saw-tooth shadows. We ran to the shade under a portable's window, sank down on cold asphalt. Our chests pumped air in and out. Pain burned in leg muscles. Sweat chilled foreheads and necks. Larry muttered.

"We killed him..."

"*We didn't kill him!* He ain't dead. You got to have faith."

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"Oh yeah? What's in your hands, Neil?"

I wanted to scream at him, punch him in the face and go home. That's what I wanted. But I stayed.

The plywood skirt of the portable bowed against my weight. I pushed. It bent in. The portable was supported by three-foot sections of two-by-fours, the sheets of plywood keeping the kids from playing under the structure.

I chucked the head under the portable, let the plywood snap back into place. Larry screeched.

"What'd you do that for?"

"*I'm hiding Burger. Now shut up!*"

He sagged like a forgotten puppet. I sat next to him, just our arms touching. We sulked there as indigos chased each other across the September twilight. I could feel the magic all around, tingling my skin, brushing my arms with goosebumps, combing the playground grass. Couldn't Larry feel it? The magic would show us what to do next. It was working.

The school yard was a different place at night, unfamiliar. Scary. Different shadows, the buildings dark foreboding slabs of stone thrown up to hide...things. And things came here. We'd find evidence of their passing the next day at recess; broken pieces of brown stubby bottles, rubber tubes like the discarded skin of some short thick snake, crushed cigarette packages, ends of cigarettes butted out in the sandbox.

Footsteps. Teenage voices swearing, talking in half sentences.

Think of the Devil and he will come.

Around the corner strolled Chris Riverty and Morris Bartlett and John Ferguson. Bartlett nearly stepped on my toe. Ferguson let out a startled yelp. Riverty just stopped, calmly looked down at us up against the portable. A smile slashed Riverty's face.

"What we got here? Little shits. Little faggot shits come here to play with themselves." Bartlett and Ferguson laughed, not like it was funny, like they were supposed to.

Riverty was five years older than us. Cigarette-burn scars on the back of his hand, lean frame, raven hair hanging ragged. Lived at the group home up by the highway. Rumors said Riverty and Bartlett and Ferguson murdered a bus driver named Stevens doing a late shift on Saturday night.

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Said Riverty smiled when he slipped the knife in the man's kidneys, took his cap, that was all he wanted. Riverty was the darkness in my closet at night.

Riverty glared at Larry. "You hang with that fat geek, don't ya? Come here." Larry stayed still.

"Come here!"

"Don't," I said. It didn't feel like my lips moving, my voice speaking.

Riverty came at me smiling. I stood. Better stand whatever was coming.

"You telling people what they should do? You pushing people around?"

His hands struck me flat in the chest. His hands were hard as hurled rocks, as ice balls, as my Dad's handshake. Pushed me back against the portable. The world tilted. I saw Larry running across the field.

He ran, left me with them alone. I knew why he'd run, to get a grownup to come. But I still hated him for leaving me.

Bartlett and Ferguson were on either side of me, each gripping an arm. I couldn't move, I twisted but I couldn't. Larry would get somebody. Just had to hang on.

"Hey Chris," Bartlett said in a thick slow voice. "Free punches."

"Hold his face."

Callused fingers gripped my hair and chin. My eyes stretched wide when Riverty lit a cigarette.

"No. Don't. Come on."

"Should I?" He asked Bartlett and Ferguson.

"Don't..."

"Do it!"

"Yeah!"

His eyes flickered, something inside trying to decide which way to fall. It fell. Cigarette's bloody glow descended burning and hissing into my cheek. It took all my energy to scream, like I couldn't open my mouth wide enough to let out all the pain.

"Hey kid, now you got a beauty mark."

"You're a piece of shit, Riverty!"

It was my voice. I barely felt it leave my throat.

He threw the cigarette down and grabbed my shirt in both fists and shoved me hard against the portable. I smelled limes.

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"You're going to pay for that, you little shit."

His fist plunged into my stomach. I doubled over, fell hard onto asphalt, grit biting my knees. When I could I looked up. His smile hovered above me, pacing back and forth, thinking of new cruelty. Something in my pocket pushed hard into me, felt warm.

The jar.

My fingers slipped on the glass. It took me a couple of pulls to get it out.

"What you got there?"

The jar had filled with a green liquid that flowed like syrup. It glowed, bright, underlighting their faces, a green the color of fluorescent seaweed, like an emerald laser caught in a jar. The lime light formed a bubble around us.

"Cool." Bartlett barely breathed the word.

Riverty snatched the jar from my hand. Eyed it with avarice.

"Dare you to drink it." I said it as a challenge.

Riverty's eyes lashed me.

"Dare you to." I pushed.

"Darers go first."

"That's a baby thing to say."

It was. His lips twitched in the Caribbean forest light, like some unseen feather was tickling them.

"It's just jam I got from my aunt. Drink it, chicken."

"Drink it, Riverty," said Ferguson. "Shut the kid up."

"You shut up!" Riverty snapped.

His eyes pinned me. They wished something real hard. His fingers curled around the jar and worked the lid off. The scent of limes hit the air. Tipping his head back with a jerk, Riverty drank the contents of the jar. The green glow disappeared. I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. The smile was back.

"See, kid? I ain't no chicken. Now let's..."

He stopped. His face looked like he'd suddenly forgotten his name. Green light leaked out of his mouth.

It hit me in the chest. Heat pressure rushing outward, shock wave, like when Mom poured too much fuel on the barbecue. Bartlett and Ferguson let go of me to shield their faces. Green glow ate into Riverty's

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skin, covered it in a thin shellac of light. He tried to brush it off. In the air music, like a bulimic church organ throwing up the contents of mass, filling the space between me, Riverty, Earth, and sky. Bartlett and Ferguson ran. Light spun off Riverty in strands, twirled, became a whirlpool of magic that distorted his face like a fun house mirror. He screamed finally. His body stooped, bloated. His hair lightened from raven to honey. Face changed into Burger.

The magic whirled, stretched to the black-bellied clouds, snapped, broke into a shower of lime sparks that fizzed off into night.

He lay in a heap. I stepped closer, the fear loosening.

"Burger?"

Burger's eyes turned and hugged me, glazed and bright with fear.

"Yeah. It's me."

In the quiet school yard, me, Burger, and Larry crouched beneath the portable window. My fingers pried up the plywood, gave a yank and — crack! — wood splintered. We squeezed into the space beneath the portable, air filled with cobwebs. A smell wrinkled my nose, rotting meat.

"Do we really need to do this?" Larry asked. "They found his jean jacket at the tracks. The railroad employees identified Bartlett and Ferguson as the kids who ran. They're getting what they deserve. Riverty got what he deserved. It's over. We got away. We should just leave it alone."

Burger said nothing, just duck-walked over to the lump covered by a carpet of buzzing flies. When he reached it the flies took wing, making a halo with their tiny black bodies. Burger stared into his old eyes, his old face, skin on the cheeks burst open exposing muscle and fat, skin waxy and tinted green. It didn't look human anymore. More like the face of a vandalized department store dummy.

"Oh boy. We gotta dump this."

We walked down to the lake, tied rocks around it, dumped it in. A couple of months later we heard on the news of some Labrador going in after a thrown Frisbee and coming out with unidentified human remains. A head. Never heard anything after that.

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Reading the paper at my desk, ignoring the half-finished income tax forms, idly pondering what magic hat I can find to pull my daughter's tuition from, I come across the witch's obituary in the paper: Martha Jane Stevens, known to the community as "Auntie." Stevens. Just like the murdered bus driver. An itch crawls across the skin at the back of my neck.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE LAY OUT THE CARDS and read the future. Hmm, there's a King of Wands, and a Seven of Cups, and — oh my — an upside-down Fool. And look! His arms are full of manuscripts! Interesting times certainly lie ahead.

Next month we'll be featuring an alternate history tale by Jan Lars Jensen. "The Secret History of the Ornithopter" will make you forget all about those brothers in North Carolina and their outlandish flying machine. That's not how things *really* went.

We'll also have a gorgeous reconsideration of certain fairy tales on hand, courtesy of Richard Bowes. "A Huntsman Passing By" blends modern city life with some new thoughts on old traditions into a terrific tale.

The portents are unclear, but among the other things we predict are: an adventure beneath Los Angeles by Lewis Shiner, a fantastic historical story from R. Garcia y Robertson, M. John Harrison's first appearance here since 1973, and yarns by Delia Sherman, Lucy Sussex, Scott Bradfield, and John Morressy, to name but a few.

In October we'll celebrate our Fiftieth Anniversary with lots of great gifts for you — 320 pages' worth, in fact. At least twelve scribes are a-scribblin' to join Messrs. Shepard, Silverberg, and Carroll, along with Ms. Le Guin in the issue. However, please note it won't *all* be fun and games. That scholar Ron Goulart has provided us with a very serious primer on the uses and perils of black magic. This stuff's dangerous! If you're going to try it at home, at least read up on the subject first.

The best place to do so is right here. If you don't subscribe already, send in that card (no, not the Three of Swords) to make sure you don't miss a thing.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SENDING MEANING ACROSS EPOCHS

WE READ messages everywhere, even when there aren't any.

Every known culture perceives constellations and stories in the stars. We see faces where there are none, in the chance roiling of clouds, the dark lava features of our moon, or the erosion patterns of a mountain on Mars.

We also read buildings. No architecture stands independent of aesthetics. "Beauty" changes with time, so that buildings once considered masterful are often demoted and even demolished.

This High Church defense, then, depends on how long one thinks a given cultural preference shall reign. By High Church, I mean striving to pass on the elite culture of the time — the best art, jewelry, and so on. Ruling classes do this throughout history. Future Kilroys lie in wait to scrawl *Kilroy Was Here* on the finest durable works of their time. As urban planners know, the first signs that a neighborhood is beginning to slide are graffiti. The fact that NASA now attaches disks loaded with signatures of the public to every outbound spacecraft is not reassuring in this regard.

Those works considered beautiful can even ignore structural rules. The Athenians converted a wooden temple into a stone one, disregarding the vastly different demands of the transition, yet creating the marvel of the Parthenon.

Architecture conveys many nonverbal, or semiotic messages: consider the barred windows of a jail versus the ornamented, status-rich windows of a Renaissance palace. Semiotic meanings are deeply cultural and time shapes them. The pyramids once sent a religious

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message, later a magical one, still later an engineering one; today we see them mostly through a lens that combines artistic, structural and sociological ideas.

Still, they have great power. Doomed nuclear-war survivors in Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* spend their last days constructing one in the Australian desert, a monument with no future audience, since humanity is dying; yet they build.

But some themes seem embedded even more deeply in the way we see our world. From the tension in a rope pulling a bucket from a well we intuit tensile properties. These then inform our way of looking at a suspension bridge, surely the most elegant combination of function and form in our time. Semiotic messages satisfy us best when we understand them both structurally and aesthetically.

A sense of wrongness can also be deeply intuitive. A tree trunk and branches tells us, by analogy, about gravity loads in tall buildings, adding from top to bottom. Violating this intuition brings a sense of error or ugliness. We stand puzzled before Cretan columns, which thicken as they rise, but accept Doric columns which are widest at the base. Cantilever beams which thin toward the tip are right to us, while a beam broader at the tip strikes us as wrong.

The Cheops pyramid reminds us awesomely of a mountain, but a building of inverted, truncated pyramid design says to us that some trick has been played to give an unnatural result. We get an uneasy surprise from glimpsing one on the horizon, of "dishonest" design.

Scale does not seem to impede semiotic messages. Spiderwebs and the Golden Gate Bridge alike call forth our perception of tensile structure, their lightness striking us as obviously elegant.

Yet semiotic readings can change quickly. The Eiffel Tower was vigorously opposed and originally slated to be torn down after the exhibition it ornamented was over. Within a generation this "monstrosity" had become the very symbol of Paris and France itself. It attained this glory by conceding almost nothing to decoration, revealing its sinews completely, like a vertical suspension bridge.

Perhaps the most reliable wordless message to send across the millennia is awe. To instill this mingling of fear and wonder leaves the visitor with a memory free of words or detail. Though this is a High Church approach, fear can be part of the effect: the convergence

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of awe with the awful. Many have seen something fleetingly terrible in the visage of the Sphinx.

Ancient things and places hold inherent wonder for us because they speak to deep aesthetic biases we share. The most striking of obvious markers hold a still and subtle balance that their makers carefully shaped, speaking across time in the language of beauty. Ancient cultures fell in line with nature, many of their most obvious markers (pyramids, astronomically aligned henges) comprising a vast, unvoiced aspiration to join in harmony with elemental forces. Their stones speak to us still.

Next to the Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge seems the best known example of this. Somehow this ring of stones instills wonder, though at first glance it is not very impressive to some. John Fowles in *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (1980) quotes a child saying worriedly, "Why are there so many doors?" To the untutored eye it seems easy to see in it a mere lot of doorways leading nowhere.

Like the several hundred "henges" in Britain, its true purpose is unknown. Plainly it meant much to the ancient laborers who dressed the huge stones, moved them many miles, pounded them level and true with mauls. Their sarsen stone is three times harder to work than granite, able to ruin the edge of most modern tools short of steel alloy. Though the site slopes several feet east to west, the tops of the lintels vary by only three inches, after millennia of settling. Engineers estimate that about half a million man-hours went into simply digging the ditches and banks of the area.

Explanations of its geometry revolve about astronomy; photos of it invariably portray the sun rising or setting between uprights and a lintel. To the modern mind, which rarely notes the rise of the sun nor of stars, the astronomical role is not intuitive.

Millions today know their birth-sign, but because the stars have moved since the Babylonians invented the Zodiac, most of them have it wrong. Such people may find it difficult to conceive of a passionate interest in getting the winter solstice, say, exactly right, as viewed through a ritual stonework.

Still, the henges seem to focus lines of sight and to shut out glare; they are more like sun-visors than doorways. Even copies, such as the exact Stonehenge replica beside the Columbia River in Washington State (built, oddly, as a memorial to

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the World War I dead), capture this reverential flavor.

Stonehenge itself was an observatory, not in our modern sense of a place to discover the new, but rather, a site to embody knowledge of the sky won over centuries, if not millennia, and already old. The strength of conviction demanded to inspire such awesome labors, constructing an entire complex of henges (Avebury and Woodhenge lie nearby), all to reflect an understanding of our universe as revealed in the sky, is difficult for us to fathom. This underscores the immense cultural gulf that deep time messages must span, and so seldom do.

Even though awestruck, we do note geometrical messages, some no doubt unconsciously. Stonehenge's central stones form an oval as seen from above. The lengths of the two oval axes are in the ratio 5:3; this is close to the Golden Section, 1.6280..., a number of great import to the ancient Greeks. Such deep aesthetics can cross cultures.

It is also worth noting that the perimeter of the Great Pyramid, divided by its height, is 2π, so the height was set to equal the radius. The symbol of the sun God Ra was a circle, so when Ra rose at morning the pyramid greeted him with a geometric analog of himself, a hailing call from his subjects.

Such mathematical clues play to perceptions free of words and sentences. The Golden Section is a preferred number in the aesthetics of many different cultures. That these predilections appear to come down to us intuitively, while we must endlessly speculate on the true intentions of the Stonehenge builders, suggests that some very rarefied messages can persist.

Great monuments also seek to carry messages through the ancient language of mass. Bulk alone can draw our attention. Texts like the Bible carry messages through a hardening of an existing culture, protecting the text itself from tampering or extinction.

This desire to convey some essence of ourselves, whether High Church or Kilroy Was Here, is the great impulse behind deep time messages. But there is also a clear desire to shape the future, and to use the idea of the future to shape the present. Many legacies stem from this desire.

TIME CAPSULES

The universal human urge to bury the dead, often with accompanying objects, may stem from the

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agricultural experience of burying a seed and seeing a specific plant grow later. But Neanderthals' careful grave burials belie this easy explanation, though quite possibly the impulse behind human burials is to invoke the resurrection we see in nature each spring.

In this sense some deep time messages play to this "natural" predisposition. The storage and replanting of seeds is a Jungian archetype. But long-time marking of radioactive waste sites is anti-archetypal, since we are planting not life but anti-life, poison. Rather than say the "right" thing ("Take my husband, Crag, who lived a good life and deserves mercy"), our waste site markers must proclaim "Stay away, danger!"

We have learned much from ancient burials. Intentional grave sites are often High Church, providing the deceased with some supplies for the afterlife, or artistically decorating casket, sarcophagus, crypt or tomb. Inadvertent burials can tell us much more, as with the chance discovery of a man covered by ice for 5,300 years in the Austrian-Italian Alps.

This unique find brought us a body well preserved and carrying its microorganisms and parasites, his working tools (bows, arrows, dagger, axe), and clothes. Apparently caught in a sudden storm, his is the best permafrost mummy ever found, a trove of clues to a society and time that left no written records.

Bodies can even give us enough clues to reconstruct plausible features, literally giving faces to the past, as in a striking depiction of Alexander's father from an 8 B.C. Macedonian grave site. Science can pluck subtle clues from apparent ruin, making time capsules from accidents. Whole cities flooded by lava, such as Pompeii and Heraculaneum, provide us with encased bodies and buildings, invaluable archaeological troves. As science advances, most deep time messages will be inadvertant, pulled out of history's noise level.

Time capsules embody a modern faith in a future that will care about us, underpinned by our anxiety that our most cherished beliefs and customs may be unintelligible, meaningless. Cities and institutions, no less than whole nations, have solemnly buried memorabilia, with much accompanying ceremony. The Order of Masons' cornerstone-laying ceremonies may have started this modern practice; in 1793 George Washington, a Mason, laid the original cornerstone of

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the U.S. Capitol, which may have held artifacts and has since been lost.

Roughly ten thousand time capsules already await future historians. Notably, their time horizon is quite short, usually a century. Citizens of Sandusky, Ohio, will presumably gather to open a capsule laid down only fifty years before, though, filled with objects which recall "the triumphs and tragedies of life in America during 1995." These include Pop-Tarts, crayons, the May 29, 1995, *Newsweek*, a "Buns of Steel" video and a Wonderbra. In 2043 Euclid, Ohio, presumably will dig up a seven-foot torpedo tube packed with a history of town organizations including the Polka Hall of Fame and a "Not Too Young to Polka" cassette.

The Seville World's Fair of 1992 left an interesting democratic variation: the Capsula de Tiempo, an open tar pit into which anyone can throw whatever they wish. This cavalier style, advertised as "democratic," contrasts with the World's Fair of 1939 tube of copper, chromium and silver, "deemed capable of resisting the effects of time for 5,000 years." It was the first to be called a time capsule, though its first name was "time bomb" since some believed its opening in 6936 A.D. would set off a cultural explosion, with its textiles and microfilm, TV set and a machine that teaches English.

For the U.S. Bicentennial, President Ford had 22,000,000 citizen signatures collected for interment at Valley Forge, intending them for study in 2076. Proudly toured throughout the nation for display, the capsule was however stolen from a van at the burial site.

This is another common theme: slips between cup and lip. Many capsules are already lost, their markers not erected, details of location forgotten. The city of Corona, California, has already laid down seventeen capsules (one of which I saw solemnly interred in 1963) over the last half century, only to lose track of them all, though they did tear up a lot of concrete around the civic center in a fruitless search. The cast of the *M*A*S*H* TV show buried a priceless set of tapes of the show, plus artifacts, somewhere in the 20th Century Fox parking lot in Hollywood, but nobody knows just where. Though buried only in 1983, it is already submerged beneath a huge Marriott hotel.

A 1953 two-ton capsule mandated by the state of Washington lies lost beneath the capitol grounds

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because during political infighting the legislature did not fund the last act, its marker. People can recall the ceremony, but not precisely where it was held.

The approach of the millennium has caused a boom in time capsules; there is even a company producing custom-engraved aluminum tubes. They seem designed to last at best a few centuries. Capsules are usually gestures of more importance to their planners than anyone else. The pop artist Andy Warhol filled 608 packing boxes between 1974 and 1987 with inexplicable memorabilia, ranging from unknown paintings to telephone messages, check stubs, and a piece of cake. He intended this trove for some permanent capsule, but never built it. In 1997, Pittsburgh's Warhol museum paid tribute to him by laying down another capsule assembled from whatever local residents brought in. As engineers put it, the signal to noise ratio here seems low.

Some capsule designers take the longer view. Oglethorpe University in Atlanta sealed a Crypt of Civilization in 1940, not to be reopened until 8113. (This date is as far from 1940 as were the earliest dated writings then known.)

The Crypt was devised by Thornwell Jacobs, who began the academic pursuit of time capsules with an article in *Scientific American* in 1936. He was impressed by a capsule buried by Tokyo citizens, to carry forward the names of 10,000 victims of a 1923 earthquake. Far greater disasters have befallen this century, so this tragedy and its Kilroy capsule now seem eclipsed as they lie in quartz jars beneath a Buddhist temple.

Oglethorpe houses the International Time Capsule Society, and its Crypt is indeed vast, the size of a swimming pool. It contains microfilmed books "on every subject of importance known to mankind," artifacts dealing with six millennia of history, the inevitable photos and wire recordings of world leaders circa 1940 (already mostly forgotten), and a quart of Budweiser. The designer apparently felt that much would change, but not beer, though it seems an uncertain sort of Rosetta stone. Perhaps it will be reassuring to the openers in 8113 to find that this Bud's for them (though it will be flat), but it is unclear how anyone will know when to open the repository itself.

This is a classic dilemma of deep time: safely buried, how does the object announce itself to its intended audience?

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As the Vatican well knows, preserving a capsule, marker or message by creating an attendant culture can work over millennia. Ancient religious sites such as Mecca transmit with high fidelity their central tenets, perhaps more concretely than their sacred texts, which can be Bowdlerized or reinterpreted, since they rely on perishable parchment or paper.

Still, no institution comes down to us intact from the vast era before the invention of writing. This is no accident; text carries so much information, it can knit together whole communities. Perhaps the success of the Catholic Church stems in part from its deep urge to copy old manuscripts, which served it well a millennium ago.

It seems unlikely that one could build such a devout community today, short of launching a new religion. In Osaka, Japan, a group plans to bury in 2001, atop Mount Fuji in Antarctica, a master time capsule housing biological samples; apparently they feel that isolation is the best defense.

Suggestions that nuclear waste sites be cared for by an "atomic priesthood" ignore the motivations of the priests. It seems difficult to imbue groups with the dedication to spread superstitions about spots having "bad juju." Skepticism suggests that some future Age of Enlightenment would spawn free-thinking types who would venture into the sites to prove that the priesthood was full of baloney.

Still, the rise of mass celebrations could conceivably lead to such a community. The current Burning Man assembly in the desert near the Nevada-California border, dedicated to torching a tall wooden statue every year, echoes the Celtic wicker man ritual, but seems unlikely to convey any durable message, though cultural critic Stewart Brand has at least ventured the idea.

Brand and others have founded The Long Now Foundation, which seeks to leave an enduring clock and library, perhaps with a community to support it, probably in the Nevada-California desert. A clock marking off millennia could inspire long-term thinking, though how can anyone both make it public and protect it? With a nonsecular priesthood?

Brand cites an arresting fact: The oak beams in the College Hall of New College, Oxford, needed replacing in the nineteenth century, so the College cut down some oaks planted in 1386 for that express purpose. In our modern time-pressed lives, does any organization, even

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New College, plant or plan for such perspectives?

Bits can last better than mass; strong belief systems have weathered from antiquity, principally as religions or philosophies. The cohesion of the Jews is legendary. The Pharoahs' priesthood lasted millennia, and New College's faith in the continuity of English culture is striking to us in our helter-skelter times. We could ape such deep time strategies. But how to inspire a priesthood? Modern times have been full of convictions, many strongly felt (Communism, Fascism, Socialism) and short of span — but it is not an age of faith.

At the end of our millennium we face a particular problem: the rate of change drives short-term thinking, but as our powers increase, our problems become longer-term. Environmental impacts are the best example. Meanwhile our principal tool, technology, is moving toward the transient and small.

Our modern sense of the technological sublime stems from fresh sensations of size, speed, sound, and novelty. Big things compel attention, as always; even better if they are loud and fast and new. The *Apollo V* rocket fits all of these.

Our newest technological marvels are relentlessly small and quiet, however, from ever more compact computers to genetic engineering feats. When Arthur C. Clarke picked the microchip as a recent wonder, his response was intellectual, not visceral. Speed, compactness, and novelty are passing wonders. Again, stone is the best deep time investment.

Unlike the Hoover Dam, which was designed to last two thousand years (and has impressive symbolic star-chart time markers which could be read over that time), the late twentieth century leaves few impressive techno-marvels. The High Aswan Dam and China's Yellow River Dam carry no notable messages. The millennial fever surrounding 2001 comes in an age more time-obsessed than any, but whose latest technology seems particularly inappropriate for deep time messages.

Still, one could bury a time capsule and hope for the best. Once only kings could marshal durable deep time messages. Now we all can at least try.

In my next column I shall deal with the many ways we are attempting to leave markers to endure through centuries, and what they reveal about us.

Some of this column appears

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also in Dr. Benford's new book, *Deep Time*. Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Email: gbenford@uci.edu

"Psst...e=mc²."

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The noted sleep researcher William C. Dement has said that "Dreaming permits each and every one of us to be quietly and safely insane every night of our lives." J. G. Ballard has called sleep "an eight-hour peep show of infantile erotica." Are dreams really worth all that fuss?

Mr. Battlesby and the Haunted House

By S. N. Dyer

SEX, MR. BATTLESBY ruminated. Necessary and all that, in a population sort of way, but it could hardly be as important as this Viennese chappie would have it.

If you were to believe the man — and Dr. Entwhistle must, or he should not have insisted that Battlesby read his translation of his foreign friend's ideas — then all dreams were about nothing but sex. Lighthouses, trains, tunnels. Guns, flying. All the same. Bit repetitive.

Maybe it had made more sense before translation. Battlesby, an old hand at the decipherment of vellum, doubted it.

"Hmmph," Battlesby said aloud. The sound echoed gently in the room, bouncing off ancient wainscotting. The house was in astonishingly good repair, despite having been uninhabited for over a century, until taken recently by an unfortunate family.... Now the boy, a fine manly product of Rugby, wandered Paris lily in hand, drinking absinthe and seeking death by syphilis. Worse the fate of the sister — compromise, responsible party unknown. One was almost thankful that the mother

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resided in Entwhistle's madhouse, unaware of her children's shame.

Haunted, the locals said. And this the Twentieth Century! Still, the reputation did make it difficult to find reliable help.

Battlesby laid the manuscript down beside the candlestick. "Little problem," he mumbled sleepily. "All this symbolism, but you never get round to interpreting a dream that is nothing but the act of generation."

He pondered a while. "Perhaps, then, it is really just a dream about a train or a gun." Viennese indeed. Made one glad to be an Englishman.

He snuffed the candle and lay back in the comforting dark.

He felt warm and cozy under the covers, only his nose cold where it stuck out into the frigid air. Fire must have gone out again.

He started to rise, breath clouding before him in the moonlight.

"Shh, I will warm you," a feminine voice whispered.

"I say!"

"Shhh," the voice repeated, and hands pushed him back into the bedsheets. Then a warm, no, a hot figure was upon him, loose hair brushing his face, wet lips caressing his own.

"I say!" Battlesby sat bolt upright.

"I am here for you," the naked woman whispered, and her hands...

Battlesby leapt out of bed. "Madame!"

She came to him again, leaning against his frame. He noted how his breath crystallized in the air, but hers did not.

"Come back to bed," she urged. "It is only a dream."

"Yes, a dream," he said. Her hands went where no decent woman's would...

"Stop that, madame!"

She drew back. "But it's only a dream. Come, enjoy yourself."

"Dream or not, it is wrong. *Wrong*, madame!"

Drawing himself up, he shook a finger at her.

"Wrong?"

"Wrong! An unmarried man ought not disport so with the opposite sex."

She smiled. "Oh, I understand..."

And suddenly she was gone, replaced by a sturdy man with curly blond hair and the build of Zeus.

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"God save me!" Battlesby cried.

"I'm sorry, wrong one. That's for matrons," the immense man apologized, instantly becoming a barely adolescent boy with silken cheeks and large blue eyes. "More to your liking?"

Battlesby flew round to the fireplace and grasped the poker. "My word! First you attempt to carnally assault my virtue, and now you accuse me of Grecian leanings..."

He brandished the weapon. The boy became again the woman. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?" She suddenly seemed so innocent, so frail...

"Egad, enough!" he cried. "What are you trying to do?" He turned to the fire, stirring up the embers. "I'm too cold to be dreaming." He turned to her again. "What are you?"

She shrugged, and writhed sensuously.

"Have you no shame?"

That stopped her. "Would you prefer me if I did?"

"Yes...I mean — Woman, or whatever you are, why are you doing this?"

"I'm a succubus," she said. "I have no role except to warm your dreams."

"You are superstition," he said. "Perhaps I am asleep..."

"Then come back to bed," she suggested eagerly.

"Again, madame, have you no shame?"

She thought a moment. "No. Because if I did, this would be a dreadful job."

Her words gave him pause. "Dreadful?"

"Well yes. It's not like everyone I seduce is pleasant, or attractive, or even particularly clean.... And it's monotonous too. Become a succubus, seduce a man, get some seed, become an incubus, impregnate a woman.... Same old thing, night after night, century after century.... Sometimes I wish — well, why don't people ever want to dream a good game of whist?"

"Cards? We could do that," said Mr. Battlesby. "Come downstairs to the game room. Rather charmingly appointed, you know."

"I do. I'm the one has kept it repaired this past century," she said.

"Um, would you mind?" he asked.

"No, not at all," and she instantly was clothed quite respectfully.

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* * *

Perhaps her intention at first had been to seduce him through good behavior, but there is nothing quite so unstimulating as a good game of whist. After a few nights she and Mr. Battlesby were on such terms as a brother and sister, and she began to tidy up the house for him while he read her moral lessons and instructed her in proper behavior.

She in turn told him interesting stories of the past thousand years or so, giving him an understanding of history quite alien to the ordinary savant, used to thinking in terms of battles and regents. He decided to tear up his Tudor history and begin again. It was a major project, and should have proved impossible, had she not run things so smoothly and kept away distractions. He took to introducing her as his orphaned cousin from India, who had come to keep house for him.

"Your cousin is a charming girl," said Dr. Entwhistle, his most frequent visitor. "I wonder, might I call on her?"

"Long as she never leaves the house, I'd be delighted, old chap," Battlesby agreed, secretly relieved. His definitive text on life through the ages had won him a berth at Oxford, and he feared that without his guidance she might slide back into her old wanton ways.

And so Battlesby became a professor in that modern monastery of learning, and was a happy and honorable man up to the day he disembarked on the Western Front and was immediately dispatched by a shell.

Dr. Entwhistle, meanwhile, married and lived happily ever after, though his colleagues did remark that he no longer seemed to have any energy left for his practice or his research.

One quiet night as the next war was looming, his Viennese friend came to visit. The famous physician was living in England now. He expressed great admiration for Entwhistle's eternally young and beautiful wife.

"But I must know, Entwhistle old comrade," he said, when she had left them over cigars and brandy. "You never send me your dreams anymore. How can I truly know you, my friend, or how can you know yourself, if you do not reveal the hidden messages of your subconscious?"

Entwhistle tugged at his beard, somewhat embarrassed. "Well, it's like this, old man.... Can you tell me — just what is the symbolic meaning of a good game of whist?"

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Gary Braunbeck lives in Columbus, Ohio. His short stories have appeared in a variety of anthologies and magazines, including A Dangerous Magic *and* Twice Upon a Time. *When his first collection of stories,* Things Left Behind, *came out a couple of years ago, it was nominated for both the Bram Stoker Award and the International Horror Guild Award. Last year he collaborated with Steve Perry on his first novel,* Time Was: Isaac Asimov's I-Bots, *and now he is finishing a new novel, entitled* A Cracked and Broken Path.

This lyrical tale was inspired in part by Charles Beaumont's story "Black Country," which, Gary says, "came as close as prose can to capturing music in words."

Small Song

By Gary A. Braunbeck

"Whoever is joyous while burning at the stake is not triumphant over pain, but over the fact that there is no pain where he expected it. A parable."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

MY COLLEGE ROOMMATE once asked, "Do you believe in voices?"

It was four-fifteen in the morning and we were both fractured on Jim Beam and joints while cramming for finals. Like so many other bell-bottomed, pot-smoking, self-styled middle-class mystics of the 1970s, we'd read too much Gibran and Sri Chinmoy Ghose and the Avatar Meher-Baba and enjoyed nothing more than espousing our quasi-quantum rigmarole to prove how clever and enlightened we were.

"What was that again?"

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"Do you believe in voices? Then where are they located? Are they physical things?"

"Wonderful. Three drinks and a couple of tokes and you go Zen on me."

He leaned back into a cloud of Hawaiian Seedless smoke and grinned. "C'mon, man, you're the brainiac majoring in physics, you gotta have some idea where I'm coming from. I mean, you ever think about this shit for too long? You ask yourself questions, right? Like...okay, here you go: Does Beethoven's Fifth Symphony cease to exist once the orchestra stops playing, or is it just some fuckin' ink trails on sheets of parchment paper in a library somewhere? Like, if you destroy the paper it's written on so no orchestra can ever play it again, does it still continue to exist?" He shuddered and reached for the bottle. "Questions, man. They'll mess with your head."

He OD'd a few years later and wound up part of the vegetable stew in some laughing academy but I still think of him the way he used to be.

I think a lot about the way things used to be.

Do you believe in voices?

Listen to my life.

I did not recognize my daughter when she came back from the dead.

It was the end of spring, I was fighting a losing battle with the sinus/ear infection that always came round this time of year, and since it was going to rain soon I decided to take a shortcut through the ersatz-park behind the Altman Museum in downtown Cedar Hill. I'd forgotten to bring my decongestants and ear-drops that morning and by ten-thirty felt as if someone had drilled a hole in my skull and filled it with rubber cement. I lived only twelve minutes' walk from a crummy $5.25-an-hour job, which gave me just enough time to stagger home during my lunch break, hit the drugs, scarf down a sandwich, and get back.

Though I often took this shortcut I made it a point never to linger; too many memories waited there, ready to jump down my throat. Aside from the sixty or so seconds it took to sprint through the park, I hadn't spent any significant amount of time there in over five years, not since the death of my three-year-old daughter from — unbelievable as it sounds — mononucleosis.

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I was nearing the south exit when I made the first of three mistakes — I noticed the new sculpture that stood near the corner of the plat.

The second mistake immediately followed.

I stopped to look at it.

It stood about seven feet high, ten feet wide, and six feet deep. The figures were made of synthetic stone and fiberglass covered with wire mesh, colored in tones of terra-cotta and ash. There were fifty female figures in the piece. All of them were naked. Some covered their faces with their hands, some knelt, some stood, a few were lying prone as if draped over a sacrificial altar, while others clutched their stomachs or were folded in a heap. Most of them were screaming. Pain, anger, grief, confusion — all of these were brutally etched on their faces, raw and unspeakably ugly.

But none was more gut-wrenching than the face of the woman in the center. Hers was a look of sadness so total that at first it seemed like disinterest; then I saw the small crescent of tears brimming in one of her eyes and realized the permanence of her heartbreak, that here was a genuinely good and caring woman, full of passion, understanding, and tenderness who had dreamed in her youthful loneliness of finding her soulmate and then, years later, just when she'd started to believe she would never know the love that poets and singers described, found her One Great True Love and gave her soul completely to him, bore him a child, and in the instant when her husband stood with their daughter cradled in his arms this woman believed with all her delicate heart that everything was going to be just fine.

This had been Karen's favorite spot in the city, and we'd often brought Melissa here; she loved to sit and watch the ducks and swans. Our favorite spot outside the city had been the beach at Buckeye Lake. Karen and Melissa liked to go there and look for sea shells. Of all the shells they had collected over the years, Melissa's favorites were a pair of large, perfect, shiny conch shells. Whenever we took a trip, those shells had to accompany us. Melissa bestowed more affection on those shells than most children did their pets. They had been on the table next to her hospital bed the night she died.

"It is something to see, isn't it?" came a voice.

She was sitting on a bench near the small pond where the ducks and

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swans lounged in the water. Something about her reminded me of my ex-wife, no big surprise — every woman reminded me of Karen in one way or another.

"Yes," I said, not wanting to look at it again but doing so anyway. "It's very...powerful."

I don't know why I made this third mistake, striking up a conversation with this young woman. I'd only wanted to get home. My head was a blister ready to burst and the thought of my medication was a sweet siren's melody.

"Are you feeling all right?"

Startled, I looked away from the sculpture. When had she come up next to me? Why was I down on one knee? Who'd lodged the icepick in my eardrum?

She helped me to my feet and guided me over to the bench. Sitting next to me, she leaned in to take a closer look at my face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you look like hell."

"Good. I'd hate to feel this lousy and have it be just my little secret."

She laughed, patting my hand. "Great line. Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. I'll bet you used to watch it all the time. You seem the type."

"Look, I appreciate your giving me a...a h-hand like this but I think I'd better get home and — "

"Shhh," she whispered, placing a finger against my lips. "'You will say nothing. I will answer not a word/And nothing will be able to shake our accord.'"

"Uh-huh. And that is...?"

"From a poem by Corbiere. 'Rhapsody of the Deaf Man.' You suddenly reminded me of it. A little bitter and angry, a little sad and distant, but also strong and mysterious and sensual in a...I don't know, a smoldering, tipsy kind of way. Does that make sense?" She shrugged. "It doesn't have to make sense to you, just to me."

I did not, repeat *not*, want this. I'd spent a lot of time, effort, and liver tissue in order to vanish from my old life and make myself as invisible to the world as a person could be without actually disintegrating into thin air; the last goddamn thing I needed was for someone to say, *Hey, wanna be friends?*

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The pain and pressure came howling forward again. I winced, closing my eyes and pulling inward.

She cupped my head in her hands. "Does it hurt that much?"

"...godyeah..." I didn't have the strength to pull away.

Her hands slipped upward, covering my ears and gently tilting back my head. "Better?"

"A little." I opened my eyes. "What are you, a nurse or something?"

"Or something." She reached into the canvas bag next to her and pulled out a small portable compact disc player, along with a set of headphones that she plugged into the player, then tried to put over my ears.

"Whoa," I said. "What...what do you think you're doing?"

"You'll see."

"Look, I can't put those on, the pressure's bad enough as it is and if — "

In a series of movements so quick and smooth they might as well have been one motion, she leaned forward, kissed me on the cheek in an intensely affectionate way, and slipped the headphones over my ears.

Listen: I was ten years old when I got my first rock album, a 1971 release from Dunhill Records, *Steppenwolf Live*. I played it to death but no track did I play more than the six-minute version of "Born To Be Wild" that closed side four. (Forget the anemic studio version that FM stations play during Friday rush hour; the '71 live recording kicks ass in a way the studio version can only admire from the cheap seats.) I played that song so much the grooves in the record began to wear down and little scratches, pops, and hisses — noises I came to think of as "echofuzz" — worked their way into the music. Still, I played it, and after a while the echofuzz became part of the song for me. *I'd* put it there, it came from me, and so, to my mind, that made me part of the song, slamming my bad ass onto the seat of a chrome-roaring hog under heavy metal thunder.

And now I was listening to it again. This was not the clean, re-mastered CD version, this was from the record, *my* record, the one I'd lost fifteen, twenty years ago: there was the hiss that almost drowned out John Kay's growling vocals at one point, followed by a series of pops in the middle of an instrumental passage, then, near the end of the song, the scratches that underscored a wailing guitar run, the kind of high-pitched, squealing, uncoiling-barbed-wire run that has to be surgically removed

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from your brain. I was so amazed to be hearing it again after all these years that it took a few moments to realize the pressure in my ears was gone and my sinuses were clear and open, enabling me to breathe freely.

The song came to its snarling-hurricane conclusion and I removed the headphones. "Where in God's name did you find this?"

"So it did help? You really feel better?"

"Yeah."

Most men could have swum a hundred raging rivers on the memory of the smile she offered to me, which was suddenly so much like Karen's I couldn't look.

"Why did you kiss me?"

She blushed. "I wanted to. I've wanted to for a long time, ever since..."

"Since what?"

She handed a small photograph to me. "Since this night."

I looked at the photo. Something pulled tight in my chest, frayed apart, and snaked like tendrils of black, searing smoke into my eyes. I pressed my hand against my mouth as if I could stop the tears through sheer force of will; if I did not allow air to pass into my lungs, I would not cry. I'd rather have had a fatal aneurysm at that moment than allow this particular memory to resurface.

"Who the *fuck* are you?" I said through clenched teeth.

Her face became a placid mask...except for a small crescent of tears brimming in one of her eyes. "Don't you recognize me?" She reached over and brushed the back of my hand with her fingertips.

Something like an electric shock snarled up my arm and —,

— and there I was on that last night with Karen. She was crying and shaking beside me in bed, just like every night since we'd buried Melissa five weeks ago. I stared at the ceiling, feeling nothing; not for her, myself, not even, it seemed, for the loss of our little girl because all children would eventually be crushed under the weight of a future that was merciless and uncaring if not actively malignant, and when at last I looked at Karen I felt embarrassed at being human because we truly believed we could heal most forms of hurt by telling someone that we loved them, and then Karen was facing me, her eyes empty and furious at the same time: "I dreamed that when we buried Melissa, one of her arms came up out of the dirt holding a rose in its hand. You gave me a

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shovel and I threw down more dirt but her arm just kept coming up, and every time the rose bloomed a little more. You said, 'We can't let that happen, we can't let it bloom,' and the next time her arm came up you beat it with the shovel, then you made me beat it until it slunk down into the dirt and never came up again. We both felt so happy *then, and I hated you for that! I don't want her to be dead, I want her alive so maybe we can pull ourselves out of the open grave our life has been since then — don't look at me like that, you know it's true, but you've done nothing, said nothing, you probably don't even* feel *anything and I can't stand it, I don't want to hate you so please, please just...touch me, even if you don't mean it..."*

I yanked back my hand, then shoved myself off the bench and started backing away from her, still clutching the photo.

"...I don't know how you got this," I croaked, "but you have *no right*, damn you...you have no right to...to...*ohgod* I don't want to think about this..."

"You have to," she whispered, slowly rising to her feet and coming toward me.

"...no..."

She stopped moving and held up her hands, palms out. "I won't come any closer, I promise. I didn't mean to throw that at you so soon but I...I don't have a lot of time — and neither do you."

"Is that some kind of threat?"

She shook her head. "No. It's just that you've been trying so hard to forget and it's killing you. It will kill you. If you keep going like you have been you won't last another year." She lowered her head, folded her hands, and began tapping the tops of her thumbs together. Karen used to do the same thing whenever she felt anxious. "How many times in the last six months have you thought about suicide? How many times have you looked at your prescriptions and thought about quadrupling the doses? Christ, you have to take three different anti-depressants just to get yourself started in the morning!

"Please don't look at me like that."

"Then get to the punch line."

"Fine. If you go on living — scratch that — if you go on *existing* as you have been, you're going to do it. You'll miss a couple of doses and sink into

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one of your moods, and then you'll open the door to the cabinet underneath your sink, you'll take out that bottle of Chivas Regal you've got hidden back there — you remember that bottle, the one your AA sponsor doesn't know about? — and you'll wash down the rest of your pills with it."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

How in hell did she know about the scotch? I hadn't even broken the seal around the cap yet.

The doctors had made it clear enough — if I started drinking again, I would die. It was that simple. I had no intention of ever starting again; it was just that, for some reason, knowing there was liquor nearby made it easier *not* to drink.

She wiped her eyes, then stood hugging herself. "I was allowed one day, *one day* from the future I never had, to see you again. I used half of that day three years ago — if you think hard enough, you'll remember seeing me. I spent hours looking for you that day. I — " She shook her head angrily, took a deep breath, and looked at her watch. "I've been waiting here since eight this morning, hoping you'd come by. Four hours and fifteen minutes gone."

She was crazy, that had to be it, and I said as much.

"Then explain the picture."

Not daring to look at it again, I held the photograph up to her face and crumpled it into a ball.

"You go to hell, lady." Then I turned and walked quickly away from her.

"I can't follow you!" she cried out. "I can only — please stop! *Please!*" Her cheeks shone with tears. There was not one part of her that wasn't shaking. "I'm sorry, but I can't...I've got less than eight hours left."

I decided to play along with her. "Why can't you follow me?"

She held out one of her hands. In it was a small rosebud. "It's going to bloom very soon, you see, probably before the day's over, and when it blooms I'll have to...please don't go. I can't follow you because you're going to places I never went. This park is the only place left from your past that you ever go to. Please don't leave. Please. There's so little time left and I want it to count for something. I've mi — "

"Then stay here. Look at the statue, get soaked in the rain and wait

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for your rose to bloom, I don't care, just leave me alone — which shouldn't be too difficult because I won't be coming back here again."

Something behind her eyes crumbled.

And that's how I left her.

I GOT BACK to my apartment, took my decongestants, and ate a little something. I would not think about her or the photograph or anything she said. I would not. Would. Not.

Because of being delayed in the park I didn't have time to make it back to work on foot — but there was just enough time to catch the #19 bus at the corner.

I arrived with a minute or so to spare, just in time to see the Operation Mainstream van drop off one of its handicapped passengers, a young man in an electronic wheelchair who was balancing a small briefcase in his lap.

I watched as he moved his chair onto the hydraulic platform. The van's driver pressed a button on the control board and the platform hissed, then buzzed as it slowly lowered the young man toward the ground. It sounded exactly like the mechanism that had lowered Melissa's coffin into its grave.

Even after the man disembarked and the platform had folded back into place, I could still hear its buzzing. The van pulled away, the young man moved a small lever on the arm of his chair and began rolling in the opposite direction...and the buzzing persisted like the white static noise of a snowy television screen. Thinking it was just the infection kicking into a higher gear, I pulled my nose spray from my pocket and pumped a shot up each nostril.

No good.

The static was still in my ears. It quickly rose in pitch and volume to become a physical weight on my skull, and as the #19 arrived I stumbled around, pressing a finger into each ear, trying to create a vacuum to relieve the pressure, but nothing seemed to help. I must have looked absurd or, worse, stoned, because the bus driver took one look at me, closed the doors, and drove away.

I shook my head a few times, violently, then pulled my fingers from my ears — the static was not gone, but the weight of it was.

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There were so many sounds — scratch that — there were so many *impressions* of sound. That's the only way I can describe it. And though none of the impressions were those of voices, they were nonetheless talking.

Some of these communicating impressions were so quiet they seemed barely to exist at all. I almost smiled then, thinking of Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who* — Melissa's favorite story. I'd read it to her every night, even on her last.

One of the impressions called for my attention, even though no actual words were spoken.

I looked toward the man in the wheelchair.

It *couldn't* have been him because his only means of communicating with the world was through the small personal computer — what I had thought to be a briefcase — fitted to his chair. The computer employed a program that allowed him to select words from a series of menus on the screen by pressing a switch near his left thumb. This program could also be controlled by head or eye movement, enabling him to select up to fifteen words a minute, then "speak" by sending those words to a speech synthesizer that had been added to the computer only this morning.

I had never seen this man before.

I knew all of this because the cells in his dying body and the integrated circuitry of the computer were talking to the synthesizer in the same clinical, matter-of-fact tone that a physician might use when dictating notes for a patient's medical records.

I clearly heard them.

But I was hearing the impossible; a conversation between mathematical equations, electronic impulses, and myriad physiological mechanisms, all of whom had agreed to conduct their little mixer at the same specific neuron receptor site.

As the man maneuvered his chair around the corner and the conversation grew fainter, a single thought, irrational though it was, came to me: *Her.*

She did this.

Somehow that girl in the park was responsible.

Sound, I thought. *This is all connected to sound.*

Or the impressions *caused by its absence.*

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The Vedic religious traditions believe in the "vibration metaphor": throw a pebble in a pond, and the vibrations ripple outward in concentric circles; strike a bell, and it vibrates in waves of sound; meditate on a thought, and it will echo through the realm of the collective unconscious.

But what pebble, what bell, what thought, was now sending ripples through the world I knew?

The first few spattering drops of rain started coming down. I buttoned my coat and turned up the collar, my hands shaking —

My hand.

I remembered the electric shock I'd felt when she touched me earlier.

That was when she had done it.

I held my hand in front of my face and looked at it.

Something about standing like this, bundled up and shuddering with my hand in front of my face, triggered a memory of another time, two, maybe three years ago...

...I was sickeningly drunk, wandering near the Cedar Street bridge. It was snowing heavily, high winds, blowing and drifting, blizzard conditions. I was trying to remember why I had come this way when I suddenly found myself calf-deep in snow. It grew very dark; the darkness the blind know. The cold penetrated to the marrow of my bones. I pulled myself out of the snow and stumbled forward, though I couldn't see a thing. My feet were heavy lumps of ice in my cheap canvas shoes. My body turned numb with cold, making me aware not only of the embodied side of life where everything was black darkness, bitter cold, and churning snow but — so close it seemed I could step right into it — also of the unembodied *side of life. Colors that transcended color. Sensations that transcended sentience. Sounds that transcended sound. I was freezing to death.*

I saw beings emerge from the swirling snow and pelting ice. One of them moved toward me. She smiled. She held a cold rose. I thought she was Death and asked her to take me. She gestured to me follow. *I groped my way down the snowy embankment and followed her under the bridge. She was gone, but in her place was a large cardboard packing box with wrapping paper inside. Slowly, clumsily, I got into the box and pulled the wrapping paper around me. Then I wept, for something about*

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her had moved me in a way I hadn't known since the days when I'd had a family....

Now, standing in the rain near the bus stop, I thought of what the young woman had said.

...If you think hard enough, you'll remember seeing me....

I shoved my hands into my pockets and started back toward the park.

Along the way I passed several people; some were on foot, others were in cars, but I was aware of the depths of their existence as strongly as I was aware of my own breathing.

And I heard things.

I saw an old woman and heard the first time she had made love to her husband.

I heard a child's fear of its first day at pre-school.

A bird's irritation at the rain.

The quenching of a garden's thirst.

I broke into a run. The spattering of rain became a heavy sprinkling. I heard the empty spaces between the raindrops.

She was still there when I arrived. I went up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. "*What did you do to me?*"

"I had to make you come back."

"Why? What do you want?"

Her lower lip quivered. "I want you to remember." She handed the photograph to me once again. It was smooth and perfect, as if I'd never crumpled it.

"You're dying inside," she said. "I don't want you to hurt anymore. You're not the monster you think you are. People make mistakes. It's time you understood that it's okay to just pay the fine and go home."

"I don't want to think about it," I said, dropping onto the bench. "I don't...."

But I couldn't stop the memory coming back, nor could I stop myself from looking down at the face of the man I used to be and thinking: *You stupid fucker.*

There was a time when you had the world by the balls, didn't you? Acing your finals and graduating in the top five percent of your class, snagging a great teaching position at an oh-so-private Ivy League school, then marrying a beautiful woman who loved you and gave you a perfect

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daughter who thought you were the bestest thing in the whole great big wide world *I love Daddy thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis much!* You were so safe and smug within the myopic borders of your world, and you never once gave a thought to being undone by an absurdity, did you? Because that's what it was, an absolute, certified, in-goddamn-comprehensible absurdity that in this country, in this age, with so much wondrous medical technology there for the paying, that a happy, radiant, inquisitive little girl with a giggle that brought tears to your eyes could die from a disease you're supposed to get from kissing or burning your candle at both ends. Well, I got a Muppet News Flash for you, pal; it is possible for a three-year-old girl who loves to watch ducks and collect sea shells to feel bad, and then a bit worse, and then a whole helluva lot worse, and finally lousy in a way that requires machines and tubes and pills and catheters and before you know it you're sitting in the front pew at good ol' St. Francis de Sales Church on Granville Street along with your wife and parents and in-laws and X-amount of your balding schoolboy chums listening to some second-rate organist eviscerate Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze" and dreading the moment when two dozen children from your daughter's pre-school are going to stand up and sing "Let There Be Peace on Earth" because *that's* when you're going to lose it and lose it bad and wonder how but mostly why something like this could happen. Just forget it, pal, just scratch that "why" business right off the list because there's no making sense of some shit, and your nice manners and fine credit record and good insurance notwithstanding, it is possible — and you have a crisp, clean copy of Autopsy #A72-196 to remind you in case you forget — for a three-year-old girl to contract Epstein-Barr virus and have her immune system degrade so quickly that she acquires, in spite of your fine house and dazzling grin and that award-winning thesis on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, a thing called *acute interstitial pneumonia*, then another thing called *purulent exudate*, which gets lonely in a hurry and so invites *pelvic venous plexis* to come join the party and presto-change-o! — you're looking at a little girl who in less than four weeks curls up into a wheezing skeleton and turns yellow and finally dies in a torturous series of sputtering little agonies, and you can't even get to her bedside to hold her hand because of the tubes and wires and bandages and all the rest of the *Close Encounters of the Third*-fucking-*Kind* hardware dwarfing this room

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where all the numbers are zero and all the lines are flat, so when she dies it is without the final benefit of a warm, loving human touch tingling on her skin to let her know that you will always love her and will miss her every second of every hour of every day for the rest of your life.

It is also possible for that little girl's daddy to collapse in on himself and ignore his wife's grief until she can't take the loneliness anymore and leaves him to wallow in the wreckage that was once their marriage, and when he finally lifts his head he finds himself alone, alcoholic, and unemployed. He also discovers that his insurance has been bled dry, so he has to sell his car, then his stocks, and then his house in order to pay off medical and funeral expenses.

It is likewise possible that, having nowhere to go, he will hock his wedding ring, spend the money on liquor, and try to drink himself to death.

He will come very close to succeeding.

Then one morning he awakens in the psych ward of the county hospital where he's been drying out since a couple of cops found him unconscious in a large cardboard box beneath a bridge, lying in a puddle of his own puke and just half a mile from the gates to the graveyard where his little girl is buried. A social worker helps him to find a job and a place to stay so that, if anyone cares to ask, he can say that he's a janitor — give him a mop and a bucket and a bottle of Windex, he's hell on wheels — and that he lives in a two-room apartment just twelve minutes' walk from the office building where he sweeps floors and scrubs toilets for nine hours a day, five days a week.

Lastly, though, and here's the real kicker, it is quite possible that on his way home from his crummy job one day he will meet a young woman who looks too much like his ex-wife, and this woman will show him a picture that in no way, by no stretch of his alcohol-damaged imagination, could possibly exist.

"Do you remember it now, that moment in the picture?"

I nodded my head; a stray tear flung itself down onto the photograph like a suicide plummeting toward the pavement.

"Good," she whispered. "Because that moment is when your small song revealed itself to you."

"...my what..?"

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"The voice of your soul. You *do* believe in voices, don't you? The voice of your soul holds your history, all your memories and hopes and dreams, your baser impulses and higher aspirations; it's what truly defines you. And when it reveals itself to you, as yours did, it will tell you the purpose of your life, the reason why you exist.

"It's different with every person. A dancer's small song might reveal itself to them at the moment a strenuous, complicated piece of choreography they've been struggling with suddenly becomes as effortlessly liquid as cascading water. The man in the wheelchair, his small song is still looking for its voice — that's what you heard; a child trying to learn a new language."

I started to speak but she placed her finger against my lips and shook her head. "Shhh. 'You will say nothing...nothing will be able to shake our accord.'" She tilted back her head, caught a few raindrops on her tongue, then said, "Years ago there was a concert on PBS commemorating Aaron Copland's seventy-fifth birthday. Leonard Bernstein conducted and he was really *on* that night. The concert closed with *A Lincoln Portrait* and the second the piece was over, that phenomenal crescendo still ringing in the air, Bernstein dropped his head and wept like a baby. That was when his small song revealed itself to him. He'd hit his pinnacle and everything had fallen into place in a wondrous way that only he and no one else could have brought about — he knew it, you could see it in his face. Later, someone asked him why he'd wept and he said, 'This piece will never again be played as gloriously as it was tonight. I thank God I was the one to conduct.'

"It's that way with all small songs; only one time in a life will conditions be right for it to reveal itself and once that's happened, it never speaks again. Think of the song a swan can sing only at the moment of its death." She touched my cheek, then faced the pond. "I always liked watching the swans more than the ducks."

And I knew. I think it's possible I had known all along.

I looked at the picture in my hand.

An overhead view. A man kneels on a hospital bed amidst the debris of tubes and hoses and electronic monitoring wires. He clutches what looks like an empty white laundry sack to his chest, only the sack has strawberry-blonde hair. On the floor next to the bed is an expensive piece of medical equipment that is sparking and smoldering because he knocked

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it out of his way in order to climb onto the bed and get to the sack before it was too late.

You know from the look on his face that he didn't make it.

It's hard to tell if he's crying or snarling...until you see the shadow of something like love buried deep in the dark wreckage of his face. He has no thought for his wife, who even now lies sleeping on a couch in the nurse's lounge, having been forced by him to rest for a bit.

The photo captures a phenomenon you've heard about many times before from people who claim to have had an out-of-body experience.

This was the last earthly image seen by my three-year-old daughter as her soul left her body at the moment of her death.

"Where are the conch shells?" I said. "They were right here, on the table beside the bed. I remember that they were there but...they're not in the picture."

She reached into her canvas bag and pulled them out, setting them between us. They were smooth and shiny and perfect. " I was careful not to break them, just like you used to tell me."

I marveled at her beauty; she had her mother's rose-petal smile and blue sapphire eyes, but also my slightly crooked nose and somewhat weak chin — to keep her humble, I assume. Still, she was even more stunning as an adult than Karen and I had imagined she'd be.

Her eyes regarded me as if I were the bestest thing in the whole great big wide world. "Hi, Daddy," she whispered, then reached over and took hold of my hands. Her touch was a drink of cool, clean water after a lifetime under the scorching desert sun.

"H-hi," I managed to get out. "God, hon, I've missed you so...so much...." I fumbled for something else to say but there were no words. How could there be?

"I've missed you, too," she said. "Please say you'll stay here with me. We'll have almost seven hours together. You can...you can say good-bye this time."

My heart sank. "Why is there so little time? Why were you given only one day?"

"Because that's what you asked for, remember? When you talked to Father Ehwald after the funeral. You said you'd give anything to have me back for just one more day."

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Something clogged in my throat. "I didn't think anyone was listening."

She put her hand through my arm and kissed my cheek, then looked out at the pond. "Not to ruin the warm fuzziness of this moment, but did you know they won't let you feed the ducks anymore? Isn't that a bitch? I wanted to give them some popcorn but that vendor doesn't come around here these days."

"He hasn't been around for a long time."

She huffed. "Well, I think that sucks. How're you supposed to have any fun if you can't feed the ducks? I'll bet if enough people complained, they'd change it back to how it used to be."

"You're pouting."

"I am? Sorry."

"No. I used to love it when you were a kid, the way you'd pout like the whole world had conspired to ruin your day."

"*Well,* that's what it felt like. I was trying to learn about the world. How're you supposed to discover anything when all the crabby old adults are breathing their rules down your neck all the time? And you were the worst, don't deny it. Especially that business about your computer."

"You wanted to pour Kool-Aid on the keyboard! I used to think I'd have to hire armed guards to keep you away from it."

"You could have locked your office door."

"And miss catching you in the act? No way."

"That's wicked."

"You were a wicked child sometimes. *Kool-Aid,* for chrissakes!"

"I was three. Sue me." She looked at me and we both burst out laughing. It felt odd. I hadn't laughed in a long, long time.

She hugged me again. "God, Daddy, I really have missed you. And so does Mom. She thinks about us all the time—but mostly she thinks about you."

"Do you...do you know where she is? My God, I tried to find her right after I got out of the hospital, but she'd moved away and — "

"Shhh, Dad, please. Just listen, okay? This has to do with Mom, too.

"Every living thing has its small song, but there have been countless things and people who, for whatever reason — a moment of fear or hesitation, weariness or grief, anger or confusion — didn't hear the voice

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of their soul when it spoke to them. But what it said didn't cease to exist simply because it wasn't heard; a tree that falls in the forest still makes a sound even if there's no one there, radio and television transmissions that'll never be picked up by a receiver still bounce through space; and, just so you know, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony *doesn't* cease to exist just because the orchestra stops playing." She held out the conch shells. "Take them."

"Why?"

"Because you need to hear some of the others."

"How, when I didn't even hear my own? You said that once it reveals itself it never speaks again."

"Yes, I did. But I never said that it doesn't leave an echo.

"And all things left behind can be found if you look hard enough. How do you think I was able to dig up that dumb Steppenwolf song of yours, Mr. Echofuzz?" She shook her head and laughed softly. "Oh boy, if you knew how much mnemonic resonance I had to sift through...."

She placed the shells in my hands. "That's why so many people feel empty and spend their lives looking for something they can't quite define. That's why the world is so miserable — all of those lonely, unheard small songs."

I looked at the shells in my hands. "Are these...?"

She shrugged. "They have to go *somewhere*, don't they? What do you think you hear when you hold a sea shell to your ear? 'It sounds like the ocean.'"

"You mean that ocean-sound is — ?"

"Well, *duh*. But people never listen well enough, they never get past the first...*layer* of sound. Go on, Dad, listen. Hear it for yourself so you'll know that all of that mystical bullshit you talked about in college, that you thought it would be nice to believe in, is true."

Not feeling at all foolish or self-conscious, I held the shells against my ears, listening.

And was aware of every exquisite moment as the sound waves registered as a massive but muted ocean roar —

— becoming the crash of waves scattering on a beach —

—then one wave breaking apart —

— becoming a small pool into which a pebble was dropped —

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— and the ripples expanded outward in concentric circles, becoming a rhythm —

— then rhythms.

Rhythms and pulsings.

Rhythms and pulsings and tones.

The rhythms and the pulsings and the tones of the universe.

The rhythm of insects and heartbeats, of whisperings and thunder and bodies locked in sex; the pulsing runs of birdsong and tolling bells and whistling breaths; tones of infant birth-cries, canticle moans of graveside mourners; cicada arpeggios, descants from whales breaking the surface and trillings of single cells in division and in death; the thunderous tympani of gorillas in Africa beating their chests; the chirpings of crickets; the growl of cancer cells devouring delicate tissues; modulated vibrations of a million locusts in migration; the primeval groans from shifting tectonic plates; the *gloriae* of melting polar ice-caps; madrigal dawn; *andante* night; and the brassy, sassy blues from the light of a long-dead star as it staggered like a drunkard toward the Earth: a polythematic assault.

I heard thoughts and sensed dreams and absorbed impressions as they were passed from psyche to psyche with compulsive speed and more sensory layers than my brain, anyone's brain, any*thing's* brain could possibly absorb. The atmosphere was packed with millions upon millions-squared of swirling, drifting, reeling bits of consciousness.

Attuned to the majestic cacophony I heard the murmur of every cell; the synchronic rustling of blood brushing against arterial walls; the clicking of countless synapses; and I realized that somewhere, underlying all life, there was a continual music that had been playing since life began, and that its sounds, its rhythms and pulsings and tones, were the refrain of something more, the distant memory of the chorus from an earlier song, a sub-organic score for transposing the inanimate, random matter of chaos into the enigmatic, lavish, magnificent, improbable, ordered dance of living forms, rearranging matter and consciousness into miraculous symmetry, away from probability, against entropy, lifting everything toward a sublime awareness so acute, so incandescent and encompassing I thought everything within me would burst into flames from the overpowering *wholeness*.

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I was hearing the voice of the soul, maybe of all souls.

I felt divided from my body, standing outside my flesh observing all of it, my only companion the delicate echo of a single voice-note, pure and easy and somehow incomplete, that rose above the cacophony and whistled through me like a breeze through an open window. I tried to grasp the echo, to make sure I had understood its meaning, but it was gone too quickly.

I turned toward Melissa. My daughter said nothing, only gestured toward the sculpture.

I rose to my feet as the rain grew more dense and moved toward it.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe.

All fifty figures were still there, and all of them still suffered unimaginable pain —

— but now all of them, their hands grasping synthetic stone roses, had Karen's face.

God pity women who love unselfishly, true souls who offer their hearts and dreams to men who don't deserve them, whose grief must be borne privately so they might be strong for the weaker ones they love, who grow used to being lonely in the company of a husband too self-absorbed to notice their pain, who must sustain themselves on memories of tenderness rather than the promise of it, and who continue to love faithfully even if that love is never returned in equal measure. May whatever joy there is in your life be safe from harm. God pity your selflessness. I once knew such a woman and, for a time, loved her as best I could. But it wasn't enough to protect her from the night. Forgive me.

I climbed onto the base of the sculpture and pulled myself close enough to kiss her wonderful lips if they had been real, to hear her laugh that so often had given me the strength to go on, to remember how she had, for a while, opened me up to feelings and tiny kindnesses that most men never experience; and close enough for all of that, I knew her outrage, her loss, her terrible loneliness and sorrow, this splendid woman who'd needed so much from me but asked for so little and didn't get even that much —

— here, before me, was Karen's hurt made physical, and I could see now in all of the figures' expressions the terrible evolution of what she'd

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gone through; from the look on her face when I'd told her that Melissa had died to the way she'd forced herself not to cry the day she walked out of my life, I had now before my eyes all the feelings I never heard with my heart.

I fell backward onto the spongy ground. Melissa knelt beside me and took my hands. "I love you, Dad."

She held me in her arms, rocking me like a baby, there under the pounding rain and the perpetually grief-stricken gazes of her mother.

Melissa touched my cheek, then kissed my forehead. "Did you hear it?"

"...yes..."

"So you know?"

"...godyeah.."

She kissed me again, then held me closer. "I wish you hadn't loved me so much."

I grasped one of her hands in mine, brought it to my lips. "Me too, hon. I'm s-sorry, but me too."

And almost added: *Because.*

Because if I hadn't loved her so much, I would have seen that my wife's pain was so much greater than my own, and I would have helped her through it, and we would have gone on together.

It was as simple as that: The purpose of my life had been to share it with her. For better or for worse, as the saying goes.

"You have to find her, Daddy," whispered Melissa. "It's going to be hard, and it might take a long time, but you have to find her. She still hurts so much. She never stopped needing you. Or loving you."

"Oh Christ, honey...*how*?"

"Shhh." She placed her finger against my lips and pressed her rose into my palm. "You just have to...listen..."

For a while we listened together, holding each other on that bench in the rain, until the afternoon faded into twilight and the twilight into night.

I tried to say all of the things I had dreamed of saying to her for so many years but there wasn't enough time. How could there have been?

In her last moments Melissa took my hands in hers and kissed my cheek once again.

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"I've wasted so much time," I whispered to her. "We could have had an entire day but I — "

"I love you. And when love is present, no time is ever wasted. I've had my lifetime with you today, and that's enough. It has to be." She wrapped her arms around me. "Good-bye, Daddy. You'll be happy again someday."

I looked down at the rose she had given to me. It was in full bloom. "Good-bye, hon. I wish — "

"Shhh, you mustn't — "

And then she was gone.

I moved back into the cacophony layer by lonely layer. I listened to the old songs, the sad songs, the bitter, misused, and jubilant songs, all so ephemeral, all so small. I listen still. Every moment of every day, wherever I go, they are with me.

The echo of Karen's small song is here, somewhere. If I can find it, it will lead me back to her. So I listen for it. Truly listen. And I prepare for the day when life shall continue by her side.

In the night I hear the poetry of this world; the patience of the darkness, the sighing of the moon, the laughter of dreams.

A pressed rose rests in my breast pocket.

My daughter's kiss still lingers on my cheek.

In my hands are two perfect shells.

I will find my wife, no matter how long it takes.

And I warn the universe: *I will not lose her a second time.*

Do you believe in voices?

Then listen.

Listen.

Listen....

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Curiosities

Floor Games by H.G. Wells

HERE IN A few thousand words, on seventy pages liberally illustrated with photos and line drawings, Wells shows how he and his two small sons create unexplored islands, build and populate cities, scale mountains, using lead figures, tin ships, mechanical trains, wooden boards and bricks, and their imaginations.

Wells is of his time. Indians and Zulus are savages. Generous, toy-giving uncles are invoked, but not aunts. Little girls are mentioned only in passing. But he is seen here at his most charming and least pretentious. "When islands cease somehow to dazzle...we say: 'Let us make a funicular. Let us make a funicular more than we have ever done.'"

He pleads repeatedly for blocks that are plain, sturdy pieces of wood which can be turned to every purpose, for farm and wild animals and, above all, for civilian figures instead of the super-abundant toy soldiers.

Two years after this book, Wells produced his better known *Little Wars*, the basis of subsequent wargames, a kind of 1/32 scale inadvertent prophecy of the impending catastrophe of August 1914.

Floor Games's aims are modest. "If one Uncle or parent buys the wiselier for me, I shall not have lived in vain," is how it ends.

But its legacy is substantial. The book was an inspiration for Jungian Sand Table Therapy, an unlocking of a child's subconscious through play. In the best tradition of "Curiosities," it is currently, tragically, out of print.

—Richard Bowes

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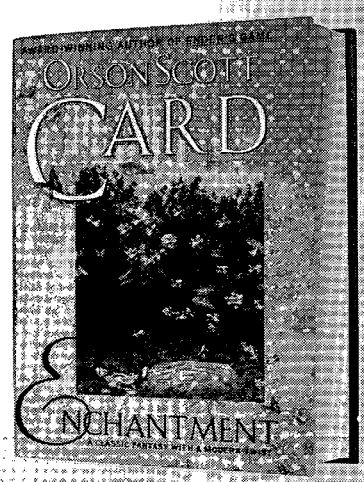

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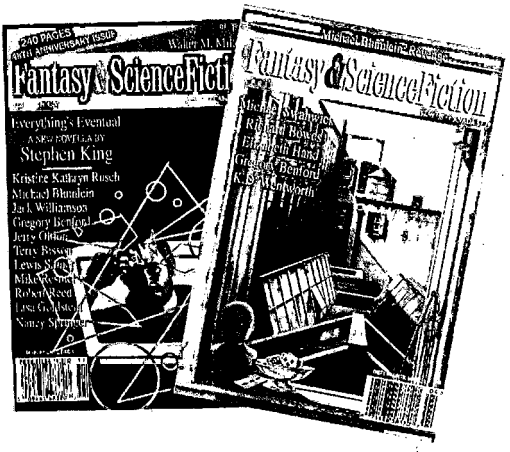

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